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Demon Lord, Retry!





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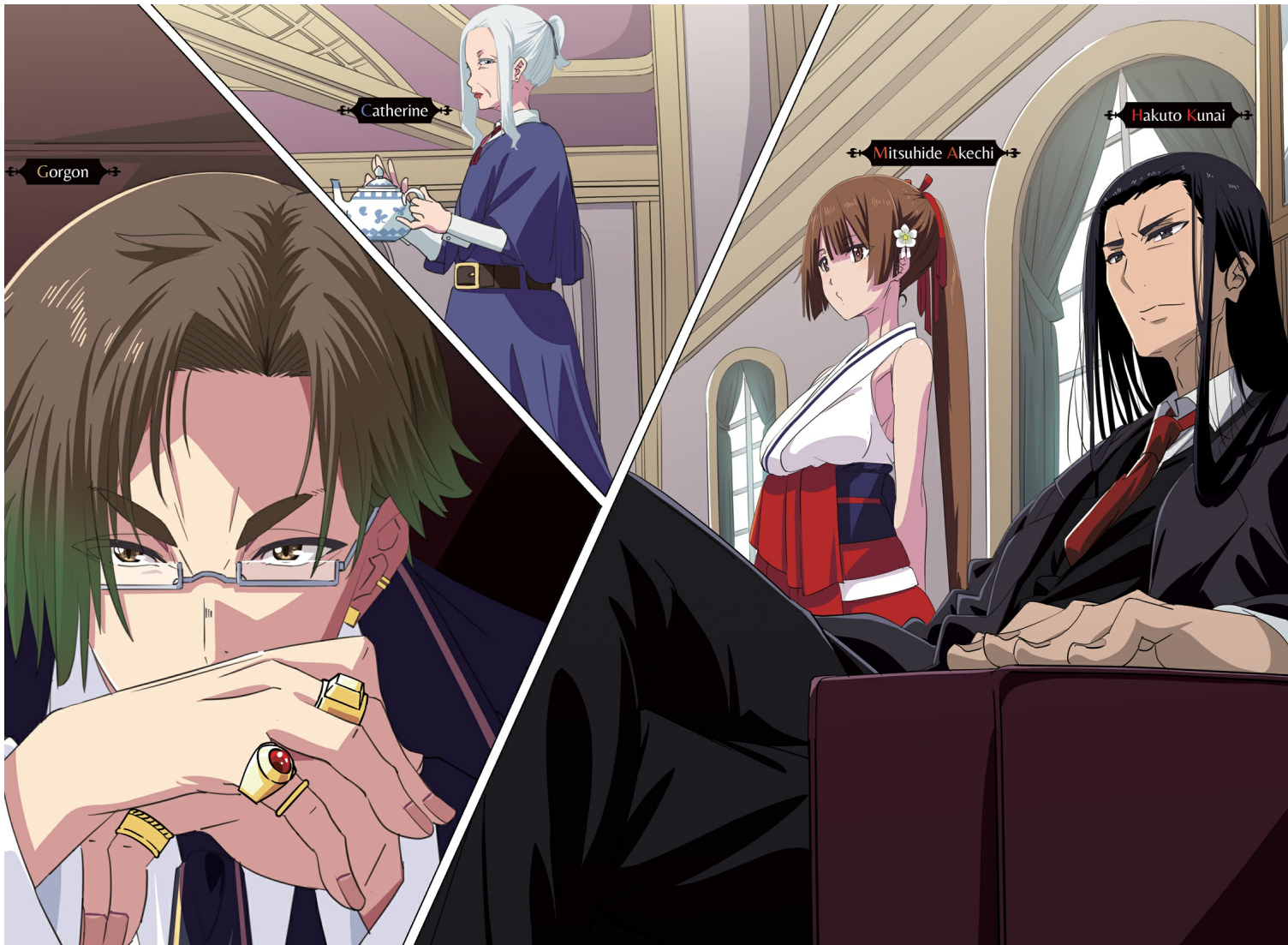
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Demon Lord, Retry!



DEMON
LORD,
RETRY!







Eagle

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Chapter 10: The Ruler of Night

Changes and Decisions

—The village of Rabbi, Holylight.

Even with Holylight's internal power struggle intensifying, the village remained incredibly peaceful. Each day in Rabbi was bustling with energy, and the mornings began early with the Imperial Morning Stretch. This practice had become public routine ever since Kondo had taken to broadcasting the accompanying music over a loudspeaker system throughout the village.

In the numerous plazas around Rabbi, villagers who had memorized the routine led groups of others. With a bonus of five bronze coins added to their daily salary for anyone leading the Stretch, this morning ritual had become a serious matter, serious enough to justify the ordeal of doing full-body activity right after getting out of bed. The Stretch had also proven greatly effective at its intended purpose of reducing accidents and injuries.

"Grah... I gotta stretch farther...! With better posture...!"

"Notice me, Grand Foreman!"

Five bronze coins were the equivalent of a mere five dollars, but this was no trivial amount to the residents of this world. Naturally, most everyone in the village took the Stretch very seriously.

The introduction of a morning routine was beginning to revolutionize the mindset of the day laborers in the village. Said mindset might have come easily to most, but these laborers—who had previously failed to hold down a job or save up so much as a single silver coin—had never understood the meaning of work ethic. They were now learning to make an honest living.

Tahara had implemented various schemes to alter the laborers' worldview: the daily cash bonus, for example. The numerous foremen that oversaw each work site in Rabbi were instructed by Tahara to choose the best worker under them to receive a cash bonus of five bronze medallions. At the end of the work day, the chosen employees would step out of the crowd and receive their

reward to great applause and envy from their fellow workers. Of course, this sparked the determination in all of Rabbi's day laborers to remain in the village to perform the next day's labor as well, with them performing noticeably better since the introduction of the bonuses.

Food stands that lined the Common District were bursting with food, with the smell of cooked chicken, pork, and vegetables filling the air above the morning rush. Laborers were wolfing down their breakfasts, trading reviews of today's food stands and comparing them to yesterday's. Each and every stall earned its place in the village by maintaining its popularity.

Cake, the princess of a fallen kingdom, watched the commotion of the village from afar, completely astounded. *This is the domain of devils...* she thought. It was cold hard cash that drew people here and motivated them to work to the best of their abilities. This deliberate reframing of the villagers' outlook would give rise to an incredible force once it became normalized that hard work actually paid off. Currently, any amount of hard work in Holylight—and most other nations, for that matter—simply lined the pockets of nobles.

Clever method... No sane ruler would take this up, though. It gives the people too much power. As a former royal, Cake saw the danger in empowering the commoners—a viewpoint backed up by numerous stories of revolution in history. *But when the village is run by the don of devils...* Of course, she meant the Demon Lord. Much to his outrage, the Demon Lord would not have had any retort to this assessment, since Cake was working for Yu, someone demonic beyond description.

Cake was currently taking an elderly noble by the hand towards the Healing Forest.

"You're always so kind, little Cake..."

"Oh, it's the least I can do!" she said in a very genuine-sounding, almost angelic manner. Under the surface, however, she was silently groaning at the crowd forming nearby, where a Firebrand was handing out packets of salt, much to Cake's amazement.

"Today's the day, Tron! I'm getting that bonus."

"Here's your ration. Go away, please."

“Ooh, sweet *and* salty!”

“Gross.”

Handing out salt to every laborer morning after morning made for a bizarre ritual to behold. This went way beyond simply taking care of employees, and the involvement of a Firebrand only made matters more staggering. If a member of the Tzardom of Light were to witness such a scene, they might have fainted from the shock.

“Tron, I need some salt too!”

“I want to taste your salt, Tron!”

“I want to taste it all over my face!”

“Your thoughts are impure,” Tron replied. “Guilty.”

Despite the ridiculous nature of the commotion, Cake was shaken by the fact that the village had perfectly accepted a Firebrand as one of their own.

Firebrands will never face persecution under the Demon Lord’s rule... And...

Cake’s eyes narrowed upon finding the humans who were previously enslaved in Hellion territory now happily chowing down on their breakfasts. Their initial fear of the village was nowhere to be found, mostly thanks to their wages being paid out daily. Among them sat Hummer, hurriedly taking bites from his loaf of bread. All prisoners rescued from Hellion territory were to receive rations of rye, lentils, chicken stew, eggs, and ale until they could settle down in the village.

Now, the usual bitchlet butted in. “How fast are you eating that bread, Hobo?! If you only had the same appetite to get some work done!”

“S-Sorry! I’m too big, so I—”

“You don’t do anything to deserve this hard-boiled egg. Mine!”

“I was saving that!”

“Huh? I just took a bite out of it. You want it back? You want my scraps, you pathetic, jobless bum? Pervert! Fap monster! Blank resume!”

Hummer endured her degradation (as always) while his fellow workers watched with mixed emotions. Bitchlet or not, the girl at least had stellar looks,

and she always followed Hummer like a shadow.

Cake seized an opportunity to pour gasoline onto the fire. “Mister Hummer! I hope you have a wonderful day! I’ll always be cheering you on!” she called with a perfectly innocent smile. Immediately, the men shot daggers at Hummer with their eyes, bewildered that a guy like him was receiving so much attention from the girls. Hummer began apologizing, completely forgetting his breakfast.

Cackling inside, Cake turned towards the ever-changing village. *Even slaves and refugees can find work here without facing discrimination...* Gendered temporary housing had been built outside of the village, where all refugees could find shelter. While they slept in one large space without privacy, it was still heaven compared to the Hellion slave market.

On her way to the Healing Forest, she glimpsed another crowd out of the corner of her eye, in which Aku, Kyon, and Momo were selling something.

“Get your carrot bread here!” A highly nutritious bread that used plenty of Rabbi’s highly treasured carrots. If such a thing were to be sold anywhere else in the world, only the wealthiest of nobles could afford it. In the village, however, even the workers could afford a slice for breakfast. As one of the most valuable commodities on the continent, Tahara had strictly regulated the prices of carrots *leaving* the village. Inside the village perimeter, however, Tahara allowed the Bunnies to sell them as they saw fit. At the same time, he was ready to fully leverage their monopoly over this product as a bargaining chip once Holylight’s civil unrest calmed down.

“Start your day with a little carrot, hoppity!”

“Buy it, hippity. Eat it, hippity. Give us your money, hippity.”

“I want one!”

“Me too! Hey, don’t push me!”

“I’ll buy two if you throw in a smile!”

“The outfits on those Bunnies are enough to wake you right up...!”

Carrot bread slices were practically flying out of the girls’ hands despite the steep price of a bronze medallion per slice. Most of the customers just wanted

to get a taste of a carrot, something which most commoners would never experience in their lives.

Watching the bread sell out, as it always did, Cake smoldered behind her pasted-on smile. *Demi-humans. The third kid was an orphan too.* Human, Firebrand, slave, refugee, demi-human, or orphan... Everyone lived their lives to the fullest in this village, which was a reality Cake found difficult to accept. She doubted that any king would have ever managed to rule such a chaotic melting pot. *Save for the Demon Lord...*

Having successfully guided the old noble to the forest, Cake hastily made her way to her office. She walked past the long line that had formed outside of the Field Hospital and situated herself in one of the exam rooms, where she quickly diagnosed patient after patient. Cake had memorized the medicine in the cabinets here in no time: painkillers, ointments, antiseptics, eye drops, sleeping pills, tranquilizers, antacids, and even vitamin supplements, prescribing them per Yu's instruction. Her background of caring for the slaves in Hellion territory helped her absorb medical knowledge like a sponge.

"I-I don't believe it... I've had that back pain for years, and it just took a little piece of fabric..."

"I'm going to prescribe another pain patch, just to be safe. Make sure to put on the new one tomorrow."

"Grr! This one stings, doesn't it, Cake?"

"It'll be back to normal soon. Let me kiss it to make it feel better."

"Not fair! Cake, give me a kiss too!"

Cake churned through her patients like a machine, prescribing medicine for simple ailments, sending time-consuming patients to the forest, and directing cases above her pay grade to Yu. A perfect smile and a mechanical heart made Cake the ideal nurse, in a way.

Having finished seeing her morning's batch of patients, Cake knocked on the supply room door, located in the basement. A voice permitted her entry, and she opened the door to find Yu, wearing a smile.

"Mistress Yu, I'm finished with my morning patients."

“Thank you, you’re really a huge help. Now, tell me what you’ve heard.” Maintaining her smile, Yu morphed her fingers into something vine-like and thrust them into the soil below her feet.

Ignoring the muffled screams from the dirt, Cake began relaying news from the Northern Nations in full detail.

Listening to Cake’s report, Yu took out a piece of machinery and inserted it into the ground. The area lit up, roaring electricity coursing through the earth, causing countless vines to sprout from the soil, blossoming into flowers of vibrant violet.

“Mistress Yu! Are these the *shiden* flowers you told me about?!”

“Yes, the Secretary has taken a liking to them. I want to continue making more modifications to them, but my soil has grown so weak recently...”

“How terrible... I hope we can get our hands on some healthy fertilizers.”

At that moment, Kondo entered with a terrified look on his face, clearly already wanting to get away from the room as quickly as possible. “M-Miss Kirino... I-I brought...”

“Oh, perfect timing. Line them up there, I’ll take a look.”

Disgusted, Kondo opened his Back-Up Backpack and extracted the humans stored within. Naturally, they were all intruders who had come to Rabbi with malicious intentions. There was no way that the bandits roaming in the desolate eastern region of Holylight would simply avoid Rabbi, given its reputation for glitz and glamor. However, anyone who attempted to steal, kidnap, or kill in the village had *mysteriously* gone missing.

“Very fresh, and in great condition. All Tahara brings me is Swiss cheese.” Yu smiled, as if she was speaking about the condition of fish she was procuring in a market. Each victim had been pierced with a single arrow and was groaning in pain.

“There’s too much crime here. There’s not even enough time for me to organize the Bunny Race.”

“Kondo, you mustn’t forget that serving the Secretary is the greatest

happiness scum like you could hope for. You let slip so much as a single ant...
And you know what will happen to you.”

“Ahh! I-I get it! I’ll keep working, okay?! Please stop looking at me like I’m a maggot or something!”



“That’s insulting to maggots. They excrete antibacterial fluids as they eat rotten and dead cells in—”

“E-Excuse me!” Kondo turned and ran without a glance back, leaving the pitiable knaves lying on the ground. As for who was the worst villain in the room...

“Now that we have some fresh soil... Carry on.”

“Won’t I...get in the way of your gardening?”

“Not at all. Don’t worry. Leave it to me, and you will never be treated unkindly.”

“Yes, Mistress Yu. I am at your service.” Cake, too, was quite the character. She didn’t bat an eye at the cruelty executed before her, but rather swore fealty to Yu without hesitation.

“Good girl. I’ll give *her* a call while we’re at it.” With her usual smile, Yu sent a Communication to Olgan.

It’s me. How are things over there?

This was a bizarre turn of events, indeed. After the summonings of Ren and Akane, both with the tendency to protect the weak, Yu’s situation should have been worsening—at least from her perspective—except that she had befriended both the lost princess Cake and the Star Player Olgan, as well as Madam Butterfly, with whom she had built a strong relationship by leveraging her interests in health and beauty. With a firm grasp on the powerful locals and the adoration of her patients, Yu operated like a fierce businesswoman.

The battle of the (female) advisors had just begun. At this point, all the Demon Lord could do was close his eyes and pray.

While things were only looking up in the village of Rabbi, some individuals, groups, and even entire nations were being forced to make difficult decisions after their encounters with the Demon Lord.

——Suneo, Northern Nations.

“Are you really going to leave us...?!”

“Daddy, no!”

“Wait for me. I will come back, I promise.” Jai An bid his wife and child farewell, ready to depart for Holylight. He was a talented foreman who led his group of troublesome miners, but he couldn’t do anything about the mines running out of ore. He’d had enough of working in the filthy, dangerous mines of a country with a thriving industry entirely focused on the production of goods, especially luxury branded products. This was to say nothing of the fact that the mines were located on the national border and put all the miners at risk should there be conflict.

“You’re really going, chief?”

“Honekawa, a man’s gotta keep his word.”

“Everyone’s saying... Well, they can’t follow you all the way to Holylight.”

“Good. I have to do this myself.”

The travel roads of the Northern Nations were riddled with crime, making a long solo journey nothing short of suicidal. Even if one were to make it to Holylight, there was still no guarantee of a job. Of course the miners were hesitant to follow.

“Really, they want to go with you. But they can’t just leave their families...”

“It’s all right. Give them my regards.”

“I already did. Let’s get going, Chief.” With a whistle, Honekawa called over a sand scorpion, its back loaded up with camping gear.

“Wait! Don’t tell me... You’re coming with me?!”

“Of course I am. Unless you don’t want me and my crippling debt with you.”

Honekawa had been born to a wealthy merchant family, but his parents’ failed ventures had left him with massive debt. Any man who came to work in the mines despite its dangers had good reason for doing so. With war encroaching and shutting down most of the mining business, there was hardly any money to be found in them these days.

“Heh... You know, Honekawa. I’ve got just as much debt as you.”

“That’s right.” They laughed and began walking with the sand scorpion in tow. The townsfolk spotted the two in traveling gear and began hurling insults at them.

“Finally! The muddy miners are out!”

“Savages... We wouldn’t be in this mess if it weren’t for you!”

Unlike Suneo, the neighboring nation of Goda preferred crude supplies like food, alcohol, steel, meat, and leather. They had no interest in intricate art or luxury items. Jai An had clashed with Goda numerous times over the mines, and the residents of the city were regularly forced to pay restitution to Goda as a result. After their financial losses, as well as the occasional looting and arson by Goda’s forces, the citizens saw the miners as nothing but trouble. Little did they know Jai An and the miners had played a large role in mitigating the damage from Goda’s attacks.

“Get out of here, you savages! We’ll finally get some peace and quiet around here!”

“Yeah! We won’t have to clash with Goda anymore!”

“You’re a blight on our community!” A resident threw a stone in outrage, triggering men around him to follow suit. Stone after stone assaulted Jai An until a trickle of blood ran down his face. Still, he remained silent.

Honekawa couldn’t bear it any longer. “Stop it! This whole town would have been burned to the ground long ago if it wasn’t for Jai An! Don’t you remember how violent they can get?!”

“You’re the ones who’ve been poking the bear! Now get out!”

“We don’t need that rundown mountain anyway!”

Jai An continued walking through the hail of stones and insults. Perhaps he felt there was no point in protesting, or even no point in trying to improve the situation at all. In any case, neither Jai An nor Honekawa would have a home to return to in this country.

“How can you just walk away, Chief?! After everything we’ve done to protect them!”

“It’s all right...”

“No, it’s not! This isn’t fair...!” Large tears poured from Honekawa’s eyes. All of their hard work, only to become the pariahs of the country.

After protecting their mines, their neighbors, and their country with their lives just to be met with such a brutal send-off, Jai An muttered, “We’ll find a place that’ll accept us...one day.”

“And *when’s* that day going to come exactly?!” Honekawa howled like a child at the unfairness of it all. Jai An gazed up at the heavens. Despite the clear sky, their road ahead was dark.

After seeing the two exiled, the other residents sighed in relief.

“They’re finally gone. Now we can sleep easy.”

“Who knows where they’re trying to go, but they’ll end up killed by man or beast along the way.”

Little did the mocking residents of Suneo know that this pair of exiles would later be immortalized in history books and operas.

Meanwhile, in the royal palace of Suneo, a minister on one knee was reporting this departure to his king. The skirmishes between Goda and the miners had been a great concern for their national security, much to the annoyance of the king.

“Your Majesty, the leader of the miners has finally left...”

“About time. He was a stubborn man, through and through,” the king of the wealthy Suneo answered. He was a surprisingly young man—in his early thirties—with a recognizable hairstyle and beard.

“What shall we do with the mine, Your Majesty?”

“The kingdom seizes it, for now. If Goda demands it, prolong negotiations as much as possible, and hand it over sliver by sliver. They’ve already been claiming rights to those mines.”

“Are you sure...?”

“What other option do we have?” the king asked bluntly. As king, he needed to make the heartless but logical call. The fact that the mines had been protected by Jai An’s family for generations meant little against the reality of war.

“Those savage barbarians may now come down to the city...” the minister snarled.

While Goda and Suneo were allies, he hardly considered the Goda soldiers human, and regarded them as closer to monsters. Most of their armor was built from the bones of their enemies: their weapons were made from monster claws, fangs, or horns; they wore clothes made from monster hide; and they drank from human skulls. They were practically a different species from the refined population of Suneo.

“I hear your concern,” the king said, “but our troublesome neighbors also serve as a line of defense.”

“Of course, Your Majesty...”

While Suneo royalty were known for their cowardice, they were masters of diplomacy. By providing Goda with regular financial support, the current king had formed a strong relationship with them. Most nations in the war-torn north struggled to fund little more than their military operations, while Suneo alone had concentrated their entire budget in their production industry. This gambit had given the small country of Suneo the deepest pockets of the Northern Nations.

“It would not be advisable to clash with those brutes...”

“Our losses will be great, but our return may still be greater. Patience is key, at least until we see how the rest of the north develops.”

On top of the chaotic war in the north, three superpowers were fighting for control in the west, and civil unrest was worsening within the City States to the east. The king had calculated that Suneo still needed the brute force of their troublesome neighbors on their side.

“Your Majesty, regarding what I reported the other day...” The minister presented the king with some paperwork.

“Hm. Tahara from Holylight, was it? He must be a cunning man.” The king chuckled as he perused the file. Out of all the demands he’d expected from the hero who had saved their capital from annihilation, he hadn’t anticipated a list like this. “Tea leaves we would discard and cash for show, all in exchange for the rights to sell our brands in their village and trade art... This man is wonderfully insane.”

“To prepare a million gold medallions... Loan or not...”

“We’ll mix in valuable jewels, bonds, weapons, armor, dress, and art. No one’s going to *count* a million medallions.”

“Indeed...”

“And send ten thousand gold medallions to Gatekeeper. Stack them in a glorious pile.”

Now, the minister caught on to the psychological effect a pile of gold would bring to the front lines of the skirmish. A spectacular display to the fighting men that they would never starve, no matter how long the war dragged on.

“Incredible perception, Your Majesty. Even ten thousand medallions will take some time to seize—”

“Seize? The gold will become a gift to celebrate the victory of our new friends.”

“Wha—?!” The minister stared back, wide-eyed. That was the equivalent of two hundred million dollars, after all. The king’s proposal was beyond generous. “Y-Your Majesty... Forgive me for protesting, but—”

“Overkill, you think? See this.” The king unfurled a map of Holylight, the territories of its factions accurately color-coded. “Once united, Holylight could stand toe-to-toe against the entirety of the North—especially with Gatekeeper at its front line.”

Gatekeeper was a historic fortress remembered in history as the final defense protecting humans against the Hellions in the mythical wars of ancient times. While Holylight remained divided into a handful of factions, the best it could hope for was to hold off invasions. If it were to unite behind the defense of the Gatekeeper, however, the fortress alone would hold them strong for a decade.

The king of Suneo would actively strive for that outcome. “We’ve nothing to gain from the nobles winning out, but with our new friends’ victory comes a great opportunity for business.”

“Indeed, there will be a vast hole in the market to fill.”

If most of the nobles who had ruled the plentiful land for two millennia were to be removed from the equation, numerous new lords would take power in Holylight. Their debut parties and victory parades would invigorate the entire nation with glitz and glamor, creating an open luxury market ready for Suneo, who would be chomping at the bit to export various products to the new Holylight ahead of the competition.

“Let’s build the most lavish and spectacular cash vault on the continent, enough to make the fence-sitting nobles come crawling.”

“Now *that* will be a show of our artistic prowess.”

The king and minister shared a laugh, continuing their discussion. Tahara’s proposition had brought the civil conflict of Holylight onto Suneo’s playing field.

“Now, that painting—”

“Is mine, Your Majesty.”

The painting in question was “Waves on the Dead Sea,” a historic masterpiece that Tahara had given them. In part, the king was only as enthusiastic as he was about Suneo’s involvement because the painting had struck his soul.

“I haven’t *said* anything yet...” the king muttered. “Hypothetically, though, if you were to grant the kingdom access to it—”

“I’ll never sell it. I’ll never gift it. I’ll never let it out of my hands. Even if the world were to end.” The minister gave his king a cold look. Art had a special hold on the nobility that overpowered status; not even a king could take a work of art by force. If he did, he would go down in history as a brutish oaf of a king, any loyalty from his subjects replaced by mockery.

“Most importantly, Your Majesty, I hear there are countless treasures hidden in the shop of this McDonald.”

“It will be a grave day indeed if masterpieces like that painting hidden away in

Holylight were to slip through our grasp... We need to collect as many of them as possible, and as quickly as possible.”

While Tahara and the Demon Lord were all too happy to sell off any valuable pieces of art, some considered these pieces national treasures. Those masterpieces would inevitably trigger a series of intense auctions inside and outside of Holylight.

Meanwhile, the people of the Republic ravaged by the Invasion were forced to make a difficult decision.

“Hand over the city of Rookie...” The owner of the Kid Company groaned as he repeated the takeaway from their negotiations.

The company president joined in his lament. “In a way, Master Kid, it is not all bad...”

“If the threat of the Anima really will decrease... But they could just as easily sic the Anima on us if their ties are as close as they claim.” Kid’s observation caused the president’s eyes to widen. “Branching out into Holylight, however, is an interesting thought. Our position as a refuge from war is not guaranteed to us forever.”

The Invasion had driven tourists away from the Republic, much to its detriment. If its image as a resort destination untouched by war was to be shattered, the finances of Edogawa would plummet.

The president, who had spoken to Tahara, agreed. “Our position can drastically change depending on the outcome of Holylight’s civil unrest. I believe we should take root there ahead of the other trading companies.”

“Risk management... You’re on the right track,” Kid muttered lazily with his chin in his palm, all the while reading many steps ahead. Merchants had as keen a sense of change as nobles had of self-preservation. *At some point, Kid mused, the Anima will make their move. When they do, we’ll end up handing over Arthur on the border and the city of Doyle behind it, not to mention Rookie, which leads to them. We have no way to prevent the Anima from invading, after all.*

Kid's calculation was correct. Funnily enough, his thought process was the same as Tahara's. He shared his thoughts with the president.

"Grant the entirety of our defensive line... That's a bit..." The president naturally hesitated, but those areas only threatened the Republic and brought in no monetary income.

Kid continued, now with resolve in his eyes. "We have been playing the role of politicians, but at our core, we are merchants. Nothing wrong with trading land for profitability." In other words, merchants derived their wealth from markets and customers in lieu of land. Kid muttered this aloud and mentally separated himself from the Four Pillars whom he had leeches off of. As the situation had changed, he would have to find another host.

"Prepare the land grant. Quietly," Kid told the president. "And deliver military supplies to Gatekeeper as a 'sign of goodwill.'"

"Understood!"

While the unrest in Holylight had caused numerous motions in foreign lands, the biggest change and most difficult decision were still yet to come...and Dona Dona and his fellow nobles were soon going to find out.

——Fortress deep within Dona's territory.

The Wise Angel Gatekeeper was a grand fortress owned by Dona, built at his command as competition for the original Gatekeeper, which was said to have been built in the days of myth. Despite his childish intentions, Dona's endless financial devotion to the fortress had grown it to a size comparable to its mythical counterpart. The fortress had also been built by the blood and sweat of tens of thousands of people; it would have been foolish to even try and count how many workers had lost their lives from overwork or accidents. Residents who lived in the vicinity of the fortress never set foot near it, as it was rumored one could hear the dead when they came close to the veritable monolith.

Now the noble army had gathered at the fortress in question.

"Is that Lord Slug's army?! How resplendent!"

“And those are the soldiers of Langrit. See the gold embroidery on their banners?”

“Look over there! Lord Bokuroku is riding an animal I’ve never seen before!”

“You dolt, that is called an elephant. He also has tigers and panthers in cages.”

Every time an allied troop entered the fortress, the nobles loudly cheered and toasted; one of the nobles’ unwritten rules was to stand out in the crowd as much as possible. Rather than even the faintest hint of war, there was a grandiose parade in the fortress.

They saw war in the same light they did sport hunting, since their only experience in battle was slaughtering powerless bands of civilians or bandits. As the size and equipment of armies decided most battles, the nobles were plenty powerful in their own right.

Watching the menagerie of his allies, Dona proudly stroked his mustache, knowing that there was no army on the continent that compared to his when it came to the quality and extravagance of gear. Shrimp stood behind him, also watching with pride.

“An incredible sight. What better stage is there to showcase the might of our army?” Dona asked.

“All thanks to your influence, Uncle. Our reinforcements should arrive shortly.”

“Hmph. From the Tzardom and Xenobia, you said...? Will they be of any use?”

“Those savages are at war year-round. They are sure to run around the battlefield like wild beasts.”

“Pitting beasts against beasts... That will be quite the show.”

Since Dona’s summons, twenty thousand had come to Gatekeeper, with twenty thousand more expected, not including the reinforcements from the Tzardom and Xenobia. To all nobles at Gatekeeper, victory seemed all but certain, so their attention was fully devoted to putting on a graceful display and scoring bragging rights on the battlefield.

“Shrimp. Any response from my bride, White?”

“She still hesitates to answer. Women,” Shrimp chuckled, combing his hand through his hair. He had watched his uncle Dona get his hands on everything he ever wanted, only to be driven mad by a single woman out of his reach. Shrimp found humor in the situation.

“This is no laughing matter! Even I can’t do a thing if she remains locked up in that Holy Castle...!”

“Women flee when they are chased. Perhaps a more *patient* strategy would play out in your favor?”

“You dare tell me to have patience?!”

“Haste makes waste, Uncle... I’ve an idea.”

“What is it?! Spit it out, already!”

Amused by his uncle’s desperation, Shrimp held up a single finger in an elegant gesture becoming of a noble. He was arrogance personified. “Water Spell Stones... We stop exporting them to the Holy City. Lady White, with her exceptional mercy for the people, will surely get the message.”

“Drying out the Holy City... You are one devious schemer, Nephew.”

At Shrimp’s suggestion, Dona had once already hiked up the price of his Water Spell Stones. The working class, at least, was dried out as it was. Imagine if all the waterworks were shut down in a metropolis on Earth; humans, as well as livestock and farmland, required access to water, particularly in the arid climate of Holylight.

“The price increase has already parched half the nation, and its people cry for mercy.”

Dona laughed. “They’ll finally learn to whom they owe a debt of gratitude!”

“Export is particularly restricted in the north, where the savages rule. Reportedly, they wander from town to town, begging for drops of water.”

“Mummified before the battle’s even begun! Incredible!” Dona burst into gut-jiggling laughter, looking to the mountain range behind him.

Holylight was a landlocked nation, mostly surrounded by mountains. However, through brutal abuse of a massive labor force, the Donas had dug a

road to the ocean, where they controlled a hidden port. This proprietary trade route had greatly contributed to the financial success of his clan.

“Hm. Our foreign allies approach on the water... I suppose their new master should greet them.”

Countless blurs on the horizon were approaching the hidden port, expecting a warm welcome. Dona cheerfully started towards the port, as Shrimp turned in the opposite direction towards Azur, who had been welcoming the noble lords as they arrived.

“Quite the festivity. Wouldn’t you agree, Azur?”

“A pleasant surprise to see you, my lord... Is there an unscheduled arrival?” The order and timing of their arrivals, naturally, meant a great deal to the nobles. Despite the appearance of unification, the noble army contained self-serving and ambitious lords ready to seize power at the first opportunity.

“No one in Holylight deserves a greeting from me. I came to talk to you.”

“My lord... What an honor.” Azur bowed humbly, only lacking sincerity in his eyes. He felt not a shred of respect for his master Dona or Dona’s nephew.

As if he could see through Azur’s guise, Shrimp gave the butler an icy look. “Seeing as you’re still here when civil war’s around the corner, I assume your negotiations with your *former associate* didn’t go as hoped. My sincerest condolences.”

“I don’t quite follow, my lord...”

“The Numbered. That’s why you’re still here, isn’t it?” The phrase made Azur’s brow lift ever so slightly—a rare sight for the master assassin steeled to conceal all emotions. Shrimp seemed to enjoy Azur’s response, as he spoke in a sing-song voice, “Those filthy orphans... A limbless girl, a boy beaten to blindness, another mute from illness... And wasn’t there one who had their face skinned and replaced with pig’s skin? Who’s going to take in those pieces of trash?”

“I...”

“It’s all right, some sense of pity must have been kindled within you as you spent time with them. The assassin with a heart of gold! Bards will jump at the

chance to sing about you.” As Shrimp mocked him, Azur sank his head in a deep bow, hiding his face from Shrimp. “Uncle seems to have grown tired of playing with them, but there are plenty of lords here with *specific* needs. There’ll always be a demand for the Numbered.”

Azur silently gritted his teeth. What had started as a group of a hundred children had dwindled to less than ten, the lot being used, abused, and discarded along the way. To any of the nobles, they were nothing but playthings.

“Your homestead has no reason to take them in either, with the risk of butting heads with us,” Shrimp added. “Besides, you’re a wanted man in Xenobia. You won’t find anyone else on the continent who could keep you safe.” Shrimp tacked on one reality check after another, painting Azur as a caged bird. “But I’m not stupid. I always thought it was a bitter loss to waste a talent like you. So, I have a proposal for you.”

“A proposal...?”

“Soon, this will become a hunting ground for savages. In the midst of battle, I need you to assassinate the resistance leaders. Put in good work, and I’ll consider freeing the Numbered.”

“My lord, the security of a battlefield is inopportune for an assassination—”

“Stop. Making a move against those barbarians before the war starts could be taken as cowardice. This hunting party will become the foundation of our rule that will last for millennia, and an opportunity to mark our magnificence in history.” With a hand on Azur’s shoulder, Shrimp whispered into his ear. “It goes without saying that I always keep my word. No matter how outlandish, with or without a handshake... It’s what nobles do.”

“My lord, if I die trying to complete this mission—”

“I have no interest in that band of filth. I’ll toss them into some orphanage after the hunt is done.” Shrimp turned on his heel and left with a flourish.

Shrimp—and most nobles—would keep their word, as they considered themselves honorable. Azur had no choice but to trust Shrimp’s sense of dignity.

At this point... My only option is to fight. What else can a man like me do for those poor children...? The Demon Lord in black, who called a mock-angel “a hunk of metal,” flashed in Azur’s mind. A rational part of his brain calculated that none of the assassination tactics he had acquired through his trials and tribulations would serve him any good against the Demon Lord.

Cheering could be heard from the port behind him, signaling the arrival of their reinforcements. Azur could not foresee whether they would spell victory or doom for the noble army.

The dark cloud that had been creeping over Holylight had finally cracked, bringing lightning and rain. It was anyone’s guess as to who would remain standing after the storm passed.

The City without Its Tyrant

Jack loses!

The news flew to every corner of the capital in a flash. The leader of the Jack of All Trades that ruled Euritheis under its thumb had lost on his home turf: the Colosseum. People flooded out onto the streets with lanterns, buzzing with the breaking news.

“Hey, did you hear?! Jack went down!”

“Yeah! It was King from Heaven’s Ward!”

“Long live King! We’ve been dreaming of this day!”

“This calls for a toast! Bring everyone over, we’re drinking until the sun comes up!”

In every corner of the city, people rejoiced over the fall of their tyrant and his ironfisted rule.

Many shops reopened their doors and bars overflowed with joyous patrons. The people soon crowded the food stands, which led to celebration throughout the streets. Cheers, music, and dancing filled the entire city in a grand event.

The news, of course, made its way to the slums, where its people rejoiced just the same. Some howled, some cried quietly, and others stood in disbelief. They had lost so much to Jack’s rule: money, possessions, homes, family, and even their own lives. So many of them had lost their entire youth. Some were simply overcome with the news, running around repeating it to every ear they could find.

Amidst the chaos, one family had a miraculous reunion.

“You’re all right...!”

“I made you wait so long... I’m sorry.”

“Dad!”

“Daddy!”

The sisters who had encountered the Demon Lord by chance were reunited with their father, who had arrived in Ren’s arms almost unrecognizable. The Demon Lord’s Bandage had begun to heal his countless lacerations and the burns on his face and neck. The item’s power to heal any injuries over time was showing great efficacy.

As the father told the hellish story of his time in the Colosseum, his wife gritted her teeth and the sisters cried in outrage, but by the time their father finished his tale, they were celebrating with their hands in the air the mysterious man who had defeated the nightmarish hellbeast, immediately knowing their father’s savior to be King.

“It’s Master King! He saved you!”

“Thank you, Master King!”

“K-King...?” their father muttered in confusion as his wife gently took his hands and led him to the dining table.

“You must be starving. Why don’t you have dinner first?”

“Dinner. Thank you... Wait, are these...carrots?!”

“Master King gifted us some, Dear! They’re unbelievably delicious!”

“They’ll give you strength!”

Their father was further confounded by the mysterious King when he discovered that he had healed his wife’s ailment in no time. Whatever King was, the man thought, he was an incredible entity. Powerful hunger overcame his apprehension at the dish before him, and he shakily reached for a spoon. As soon as a spoonful of soup slid down his throat, he felt an immense healing effect surge through his body.

“H-How is...! It’s incredible! It’s spoon-lickin’ good!” The father exclaimed as he scarfed down the rest of the bowl, indeed feeling his strength return. Muscles bulged like a series of rolling hills all over his body until his rag of a shirt exploded under the pressure.

“Honey, you’re back!”

“Daddy’s muscles!”

Their father had once been a seasoned fisherman with the body of a champion bodybuilder, which was now restored to him by the ridiculous effect of the hot pot.

As the family enjoyed their dinner and celebrated their long-awaited reunion, some ran by their house shouting the breaking news: “Listen up! Master King... Master King defeated Jack!”

The family froze at their table for a moment before rushing outside, where their neighbors were pouring onto the street, embracing one another in tears. The family held each other and gazed to the heavens as if to relish this night sure to be remembered in history. Lucky for them, the Demon Lord’s impulsive scattering of cash had filled the pockets of those in the slums. Once the money had been divvied up, each slum resident received around one silver coin. Many used their portion to buy bootleg liquor and host parties throughout the alleyways.

A large cauldron was set up in the plaza of the slums, where beans were endlessly cooked and passed out to the masses. Some grilled gutted fish on the fire or cracked whole eggs into their mouth, enjoying the festivities in their own way. All of them, of course, repeated the name “King” until the excited chattering became a grand chorus that enveloped the entirety of the slums.

This historical event, the dethroning of the tyrant of Euritheis, had occurred purely at the Demon Lord’s whim. Nevertheless, the tale of it and its incredible aftermath spread across the entire continent in no time. The news was welcomed by some and lamented by others... Either way, the Demon Lord paid it no mind.

——The palace of Euritheis.

In contrast to the commotion in the city, the palace was eerily silent. It had been cut off from politics ever since Jack had taken control of the country, making it a glorified deathbed for the ailing king. Any attempt to get involved in the diplomacy of Euritheis could have gotten the king killed under suspicion of treachery.

Ren walked through the courtyard of the palace towards the king's chambers without hesitation.

An elderly general stood in her way, stroking his beard. "Impressive, little girl. Didn't expect a lone agent..." A one-woman attack on the palace was certainly unheard of. The three hundred elite soldiers in formation behind him were also in awe, but only of Ren's beauty.

"You don't seem like one of his men..." Ren muttered. The general seemed honest to her, if not a bit simple.

The old man laughed. "Thank you! I'm a general-for-hire from Xenobia. I may be old, but I haven't lost my mind enough to serve a man like Jack."

"Will you let me pass, then?"

"Hm... I have been tasked with defending the king's chamber. A warrior doesn't abandon his post."

Ren accepted this. She, too, had fought in the Sleepless Castle to defend the Demon Lord of the Empire. She would have despised the general if he had abandoned his post so easily.

He looked back at his soldiers. "That being said, I don't wish to bury those young bones in a foreign land. What do you say you and I settle this one-on-one?"

"Understandable. I accept." Ren produced Ningen Mukotsu from the void.

The soldiers let out an audible shudder at the foreboding air about the weapon. The lance-like arm glowed red and rapidly changed form as if it were alive.

The general, too, watched in astonishment. "That's quite a weapon... A nice sight in my old age." He drew the halberd and shield from his back. The shield was so enormous that it would be better described as a wall, and the halberd, a cross between a battle-ax and a lance, seemed too massive for any human to wield. "I am one of the Eight Flags of Xenobia, Barres Tigre, the Unsinkable. Call me Grandpa Barres," he beamed.

"Ren," she said quietly, walking towards Barres as casually as if she were

taking a stroll on a spring day. Her elegant aura even made some of the soldiers straighten their backs. “Let us begin.”

“Bring it on!”



Not a moment later, Ren flew like the wind, thrusting her lance into Barres's shield. Facing the boulder-like general clad in hardened armor while wielding a giant shield was like fighting one-on-one with a tank. Nonetheless, he went flying a hundred feet back, carving a trench in the ground as he went. The soldiers watched in complete astonishment. Barres stopped, belly-up and motionless.

"General Barres!"

"Q-Quick, cast some healing magic on him!"

"Medic! Go get those potions!"

As the soldiers scrambled, Barres suddenly sat up, wide-eyed.

"G-General, are you all right?!"

"Leave her to us, General!"

Barres sat slack-jawed for some time before his shoulders began to quake and he burst into laughter. He had only been so surprised once before. "Not a chance!" he called out. "I lose!" Barres had assessed Ren's strength from a single strike. He continued laughing as his soldiers muddled about in dismay.

Ren approached Barres as if nothing had happened. "I am surprised. I had expected you to suffer some injury."

"Hm. I would have died without my shield. Look at this." Barres pushed his shield aside and exposed the crack in his armor, which drew more stunned voices from the soldiers.

Ren nodded, inspecting the damage like a scientist in a lab. "I assume that the shield completely blocks physical attacks and your armor prevents Chain Attacks."

"Indeed! And yet, here we are." The general guffawed in resignation.

Ren, like the Demon Lord, possessed the skill Break Through, which prevented any enemy from blocking her Chain Attacks. Even if they negated all normal attacks, the opponent would be turned to shreds by her Chain Attacks, sooner or later.

“I’m quite impressed, little girl... You’d put up a good fight against Leon.” Barres stood up as he dusted himself off, bowing towards the palace out of pity for the foreign king who had already lost the power and strength to rebuild his nation. “What are you after, girl? Jack’s head wasn’t enough for you?”

“I am only paving the road ahead for Master.”

“Is King your master? Or do you serve Gorgon with him?”

“Master is the creator and ruler of all the world.” If the Demon Lord had heard, he would have crumbled to his knees out of embarrassment.

Barres swayed from side to side in confusion. “Hm? H-He must be very...powerful?”

“Master is the creator and destroyer of all. I pray that your master will make the right choice.”

With that, Ren made her way to the palace like a fleeting cherry blossom. Barres’s soldiers simply watched her go.

“General... What was she talking about...?”

“There’s no sense in us racking our brains about it. That scheming advisor will figure it out.” Barres scratched his head before ordering a retreat. With Jack fallen, he had no reason to remain in Euritheis.

“What will happen to this country, General?”

“Who knows? The Gorgon Company has a prime opportunity to seize, but Suneo is formidable in its own way. They may already be on the move.”

“Could such a small nation act so quickly?”

“I could be overthinking it. It is true that Suneo wouldn’t want Gorgon to stretch its reach freely. They could very well be the company’s next target.” Barres, who fought on battlefields and not in politics, could not be sure. He swiftly ordered his soldiers to begin marching out of the capital city and its festivities.

“The streets are full of jubilation, General.”

“The military seems to have run off already...”

The royal army had scattered as soon as news of Jack's defeat began spreading like wildfire. More than anything, they feared retaliation from the people after tormenting them behind Jack's protection.

"The people will soon notice," remarked Barres the Unsinkable.

"Notice what, General?"

"This is a dethroning, though it may not look it."

His men sharpened up at this realization. While the citizens of the city were acting as if they had suddenly gained independence, after the fall of their tyrant and king, their celebration would soon be overtaken by chaos. "Let's hurry for our homeland. I miss real rum."

"Yes, General!"

"I wish that girl would have called me Grandpa Barres, just once..."

"That may be too greedy even for you, General..."

"What is that supposed to mean?!" Barres shouted as he and his soldiers marched out of the city to join their remaining forces and leave Euritheis behind without regret.

Meanwhile, in the palace, the minister had sprinted into the king's chambers, panting. The king frowned at his arrival, expecting bad news.

"Y-Your Majesty! Jack has...! Jack has...!"

"Judging by your panting, he's threatening me to relinquish the throne." The king attempted to sit up in his bed, gave up, and sighed in self-deprecation. The king looked much older than his age of sixty-something, having been under constant stress since the Jack of All Trades overtook Euritheis.

Having gained his freedom from life as a slave fighter in the Colosseum, Jack had climbed the underground ladder with incredible strides—a sort of picaresque tale. He had amassed a great fortune quickly by delving into an assortment of illegal activities like drug dealing, human trafficking, organized prostitution, weapons smuggling, and bootlegging. He bribed and blackmailed the king's advisors left and right, and even coerced many in the royal army to

betray the throne. Unfortunately, humans most often preferred the winning side. There were some who remained loyal to the king, but they all mysteriously ended up dead or missing along with their entire families.

I failed to protect my advisors and my people... The king lamented in his solitude. Of course, he hadn't given Jack power thoughtlessly. He had initially promoted him as a defense against the demented massacres and plundering from Milk, the nomad nation of the North. Fight fire with fire, he thought. Jack served Euri well in their battles against the Gorgon Company and the rest of the City States. Back then, Jack was a hero who protected the people of his country. The king didn't expect the hero to turn on them.

"Your Majesty! Your Majesty! Are you listening?!"

"Mm? I'm sorry... Tell me that again."

The minister's shouting had gone in one ear and out the other. Lately, the king had taken to using a small dose of Trance to temporarily cope with the unbearable pain in his abdomen. In exchange, he had gradually lost his ability to perform any of his duties.

I thought I had brought in a guard dog to protect us from wolves and snakes... But he was a starving tiger. The king would have been too hard on himself to chock it up to a bad call. No ordinary human could have seen that Jack was a monster playing host to a remnant of the grand devil Rookfell.

"Your Majesty! Jack... Jack was defeated in the Colosseum!"

"You must be tired, Minister... Get some rest. Don't mind me." The king closed his eyes, and softly exhaled. Defeat was a fate unbeknownst to Jack, the embodiment of savagery. Back in the day, the king had watched Jack fight in the Colosseum, at times even against Hellbeasts, and he had bested every foe he faced.

"It is true! He was defeated by a man in all black and a beautiful girl who both suddenly appeared! Jack turned into a Hellbeast, and the girl became invisible using strange magic, and—"

The king chuckled. "Spoken like a bard with some imagination..." He appreciated that this was the first time he had laughed in a while. Since the Jack

of All Trades had taken full control of the nation, the king had only heard news he wanted to cover his ears at.

“Th-That’s not all! The girl changed orbs of light into food, and even revitalized the genitals of an old man!”

“Splendid!” The king laughed harder. “Let us have a drink tonight, Minister!” He had never expected such an outlandish joke to come from the cowardly but straightforward minister.

“This is no laughing matter, Your Majesty! The man was King from Heaven’s Ward!”

The king’s laughter died away. “Heaven’s Ward...?” He looked at the minister.

He had, of course, heard of the up-and-coming mercenary company. In fact, he had submitted a hit on Jack to them. The response had been unfavorable, that they refused to fight outside of war. It had been a desperate attempt: even the royal army had been bought out by Jack, and the king had nowhere else to turn.

“What is Heaven’s Ward doing now...?” the king asked.

“Rumors say that they were hired by the Gorgon Company...”

“Gorgon?!” The king sprang up in his bed, but soon fell back after a dizzy spell. This was practically a starving tiger being replaced with an aggressive swarm of snakes. Different species, but both ravenous and ruthless.

“D-Does Heaven’s Ward have Jack captive?!” the king asked, concerned with the negotiations that were sure to follow, and Jack’s whereabouts would play a large role in them. With all his might, the king managed to sit up in his bed.

“A-Actually, King and the girl left Jack where he lay... Those from the Jack of All Trades came and carried him away.”

“What?! What is Heaven’s Ward thinking?!” Leaving the defeated head of the enemy?! Completely dismayed by what King and Heaven’s Ward as a whole were thinking, the king groaned.

Naturally, there was no way for him to understand. The Demon Lord considered Jack to be a pebble he happened to kick, just like the mock-angel he

had once faced. He certainly didn't care whether such a pebble was dead or alive.

"Your Majesty, this is only speculation on my part... I believe that King has another ambition in mind for doing this."

"Another ambition...?"

"Judging by his actions and those of both companies, it seems like King wants to pit Gorgon and the Jack of All Trades against each other and take the spoils for himself."

"Impossible... He's drumming up conflict between *them*?!"

That would explain why Jack had been left behind at the Colosseum. Without him, his company would easily be devoured by the Gorgon Company, leaving the latter unscathed. On the other hand, trying to pull off such a scheme seemed suicidal, putting King in danger of being hunted by both companies. Pitting two beasts against each other was easier said than done.

"According to a higher-up in the Jack of All Trades, Suneo lurks in the shadows of this incident... They are the true employer of Heaven's Ward."

"So they were the puppet masters... Now that makes more sense!" the king agreed. Both companies were thorns in Suneo's side, and this would be the perfect opportunity for them to kill two birds with one stone.

"Especially after their capital was half destroyed in battle..."

"I see. It's also meant to buy them time to rebuild."

Unfortunately for them, the king and minister's speculation was a very logical conclusion based on circumstantial evidence while being completely divorced from the truth.

After mentally double-checking the facts, the king was certain. "In short, this is a battle for control between three major trading companies."

"And Heaven's Ward has joined the conflict. While the mercenaries shy away from politics, a clash as influential as this will bring them great profit and publicity."

Many nations would pay top dollar for the fearless mercenaries of Heaven's

Ward. With the astronomical amount of cash that was sure to be involved in a conflict between three companies of their scale, this was another natural conclusion.

“What is our next move...?” the king muttered. “None of the three companies have their hands on victory yet.”

“Backing King is a fourth option.”

“That’s too dangerous of a gambit. As fearless as Heaven’s Ward may be, and even with the financial backing of Suneo, they are still drifting mercenaries.”

“Indeed...”

Heaven’s Ward had no land or fortress that could provide them with safety, and Suneo barely had any military force outside of them. The king couldn’t help but suspect yet another faction watching from afar.

The guard outside shouted, which was followed by the sound of men collapsing. The king and minister hardened in anticipation of attack when the door opened to reveal a beautiful girl.

The minister shrieked. “Y-You’re the girl...the one with King!”

“Her...?”

“Pardon my visit at such a late hour. I bring Master’s orders for the *current* king of this nation.”

The girl’s words rang as cold as ice, in contrast to her attractive features. The king and minister shared a look, wondering how she could have gotten past General Barres and his men. Who was her master? What did she mean “current” king? There were plenty of questions the two wanted to ask.

Ren continued as if reading from a teleprompter. “Firstly, we will take any resident of the slums who wishes to emigrate. Secondly, you will prepare carriages, camping gear, and enough food and water for them to last until they reach Holylight. Thirdly, you will hire guards to protect them en route. That is all.”

Heavy silence filled the air. Neither the king nor minister understood why the girl was making these demands. He felt the urge to ask who the girl was, but

instinct forbade him.

“I-I was just told that you defeated Jack... Is that true?” the king asked, trembling. It seemed possible that this girl, who had infiltrated the palace unscathed, had used some powerful magic to accomplish the task.

“It is a waste of time to discuss such a fool. Your answer?”

“The people of the slums... You mean to say that Holylight is the one controlling Heaven’s Ward from behind the curtains?” the king concluded.

“There seems to be a misunderstanding,” Ren said. “Master rules all of the world. No entity in any world that ever is or was can command my Master.”

“What are you talking ab—” the king coughed violently, and the minister rushed to stroke his back. No spell or medicine had improved the king’s condition, which only worsened with each passing day. Even now, his sheets were marked with dark blood he had coughed up.

Ren silently approached the king and looked down on him.

“P-Pardon my state... As you can see, my life is nearing its end.”

The minister could only listen and bear those bitter words. No amount of platitudes would improve the king’s ailment. Death loomed over the king, which he wore on his face, his stature like branches from his lack of eating.

“Excuse me...” Ren held her hand over the king and activated her Survival Skill, Medicine. While this skill healed her injuries sustained in battle, it couldn’t heal others, only examine their condition. “Advanced stomach cancer. Extreme lack of appetite, insomnia, and mental stress. I also detect a morphine-like drug in your system,” Ren assessed as if a state-of-the-art machine had scanned the king.

Feeling warmth as Ren hovered her hand over him, the king quietly spoke. “How strange... You’re an enemy to our nation, but I feel no malice from you.”

“Take this. Master’s mercy.”

“Hm...?”

Ren had handed him a Nine Interworld Nirvana Elixir, which the Demon Lord had passed on to Ren in an attempt to mitigate hard feelings between them.

The vial she handed the king was filled with orange and green powder, which made it look vibrantly poisonous.

“Y-You’re telling me to drink this...?” The king took the vial with a quaking hand, staring as intently as if he had just been forced into suicide. Of course, someone *had* infiltrated the king’s chambers. Historically speaking, it would not have been remiss for the king to choose death by suicide over capture by his enemy. “Mercy, you called this...? It is a fitting end to the useless king.”

“P-Please, Your Majesty! I will follow you!”

“Nonsense. You are still young... Take care of our country. Our people.”

“Your Majesty!”

The tear-jerking moment was broken by Ren’s matter-of-fact interjection. “You do not show symptoms of any illness. At most, you exhibit excessive fat from lack of exercise, and stress-based thinning of the hair. Typical for men your age.”

The minister froze like a statue and the king sat slack-jawed until he began laughing again. “Minister! Take heed of the warning of such a pretty girl!”

“I-I am not fat! Just a little chubby!”

“And mind your hair once in a while, hm...?”

“I’m not balding! I’m not balding at all! You know what, just drink that and drop dead already!”

While their final words were less melodramatic now, the king seemed to prefer this to the sappy goodbyes. He took the medicine with a smile and chased with a glass of water. At that very moment, all cancer cells were eliminated from his body, his abdomen pain and lethargy vanishing with them.

“I never knew... Death would be so sweet an embrace.”

“Your Majesty...!” The minister reached for the king’s hand, tears falling from his eyes. What he found, however, was not the icy and sickly hand he was used to, but a warm and healthy palm with a palpable pulse.

“Your Majesty... Your hand is warm. And there are no bags under your eyes...”

“Hm? Is that so? I haven’t felt relief like this in a long time.”

“I see new light in your eyes... Your Majesty... Are you better?”

“Ridiculous. I just took poison... Oh?” The king threw his bedding aside with ease and moved to the edge of his bed. While sitting up used to make him dizzy, his vision was now clear and he felt wonderful.

“Can we stop with the comedy now?” Ren asked the pair.

“Comedy?!”

“Master’s mercy took your sickness away. You will regain your strength now, so you can return to leadership.” Ren produced two glowing orbs which she changed into Chicken Noodle Soup. This item restored an impressive 50 Stamina to its user, and even had a gentle flavor profile for those in recovery. While the hot-pot set supported various flavors, this recovery item seemed best suited for patients recovering from prolonged ailment. Unlike the Demon Lord and his self-centered tendencies, Ren’s assessments were accurate.

“Take this,” she said. “More of Master’s mercy.”

The king would have considered a painless death plenty merciful, but Ren seemed to expect more.

“Th-This is the food you were talking about, Minister...?” The king was still confused by his instantaneous recovery when he witnessed two glowing lights metamorphose into food. While he felt nothing but fear of the soup, the king wisely kept that sentiment to himself.

“You too,” Ren said to the Minister, handing him one of the soups she had made.

“A-Are you sure...?” The minister, after witnessing what had happened in the Colosseum firsthand, took the Chicken Noodle Soup happily as could be, which was most likely not an appropriate attitude for someone high up in the government. At the same time, he had witnessed Ren revitalize an old man’s genitalia and completely heal the king’s terminal illness. The minister saw Ren as a doctor with unknown powers. Expectantly, the minister took the first spoonful of soup, and cried out.

“M-Minister! How careless can you be to... Who knows what’s in this soup?!”

“Such gentle flavor! I feel it, I feel it sinking into me! Ooh! Ah!”

“M-Minister...”

“I’m...coming...!”

“Minister?”

Seeing him entranced by the soup, the king turned to his own bowl. As the leader of his nation, he couldn’t very well accept who-knows-what from who-knows-who.

“Don’t worry. It’s not poisonous,” Ren reassured.

“But...”

Ren scooped a spoonful of soup and gently held it up to the king’s lips, as if she was caring for her grandfather. The king finally relented to her obsidian stare. For some reason, the king felt enveloped in cherry blossoms just by being near Ren. Most men might have tried to embrace her. The king, too, opened his mouth as he felt his heart race. He was ready to die as it was, so his decision took little time.

“Th-Then, I’ll take it...”

“Here you go.”

The moment the soup hit his stomach, healing coursed through the king’s body, all of the cells in his body revitalized. Even his mind felt more sound for it. “Wh-What is this... Is this the God’s Teardrop Elixir?!”

“Ooh hoo! I think—I think I’m growing a beard!” the minister cried, slurping his soup. The more he drank, the more he felt his strength return. In the end, he tossed the spoon aside and drank every last drop straight from the bowl. The king eventually followed suit.

“Now, please follow those directions without delay,” Ren said without leaving room for recourse. Before exiting, she turned around and gave the king a faint smile, like the bloom of a small flower. “Congratulations on your recovery.”

She was simply congratulating an old man on beating an ailment, but the king

and minister both blushed. Who could have not felt some magic in the perfectly elegant girl who defeated Jack and created mystical food out of thin air?

The two remained silent for some time after Ren's departure, eventually muttering "Beautiful..." in unison. They shared a look that almost seemed competitive.

"I am happy for your recovery, Your Majesty, but please mind your age."

"Says the man with a wife waiting for him..."

While the bizarre conversation continued in the king's chambers, the Demon Lord was strolling down the street of the city without its tyrant. Unbeknownst to him, his little walk would cause a whole other bunch of messes.

Demon Lord Killer

Shortly before Ren approached the palace, she and the Demon Lord were imperiously strolling the streets of the capital, having just defeated Jack. While the run-of-the-mill usurper might have moved to make a historical speech or the like, the Demon Lord's mind was on something else entirely.

"Let's find that swordsman and make an offer," the Demon Lord said, referring to Albert. After hearing that he possessed some sort of magic-canceling item, they were not going to leave him alone.

"Yes. And Tahara has prepared the village to accept the people of the slums."

"Mm... Hm?"

"Just as you said, Master, I had failed to see the bigger picture, focusing on the person before me. I have no excuse for it."

"Mm..." Unable to comprehend what Ren was talking about, the Demon Lord had become a grunting machine. He made a vague guess that Tahara wanted them as additional laborers. Rabbi was incredibly short-staffed thanks to their expansion and renovation efforts, after all. Their territory was rapidly expanding as lords in eastern Holylight ceded their lands to the Demon Lord. Depending on how the civil war would unfold, they would even need to redevelop the entire nation. *Short-staffed* was an understatement.

"We can use all the labor we can get..."

"Yes, Master. This endeavor will save many common people."

The Demon Lord managed to swallow the concept, since the thought of using the people of the slums as labor had crossed his mind before. Of course, he never had anything resembling the noble notion of "saving" these people, as Ren had put it.

"I will process them on my end," Ren added.

"Let's go over that procedure. Just to be safe."

“I will have the current king of the nation prepare all transportation for them.”

The Demon Lord took notice of the phrase “current king,” as if Ren knew for a fact that the king would be dethroned. *It’s not going to be me, is it?* he silently pleaded with full selfishness. *It can’t be me!* All the while, he nodded in what looked like stoic approval. He was counting on delegating all responsibility to Tahara now that Ren had acquired him a workforce. hilariously, an addition of workers was what Tahara wanted more than anything, so the Demon Lord had accidentally boosted Tahara’s misguided respect for him.

“We must have the authorities of this country pay their fair share. Make them do more than tax their people for once.” The Demon Lord spoke with bravado, but he also had a point. He was offering to take the least desirable portion of Euritheis’s population off of the king’s hands.

“They won’t refuse under these circumstances. You foresaw this from the beginning, Master.”

Defeating the tyrant mobster *and* taking the residents of the slums off of his hands would come across as heroic, enough even to push the king into accepting their request.

“I didn’t calculate that much. I just...”

“Just...?”

The Demon Lord produced a map from his pocket. As he read it, a sinister smirk appeared on his face. While he didn’t have Tahara’s 4-D chess abilities, he was quite the con man in his own right.

“The Republic will be on your way back. Meet up with a certain hero hard at work in Rookie.”

“If I may, Master... That will displace me from you for an extended period.”

“Listen. You are to make him take over the shepherding of the mass emigration. You’re the only one who can pull this off. The hero’s too wary for Tahara or Yu to convince him.”

Tahara was the embodiment of scheming, and Yu might very well have ended

up an enemy to Weeb if she had come to this world without the Demon Lord keeping her in check. Not to mention that Akane and Kondo stood no chance in these kinds of negotiations. Apparently having gone through the other advisors in her mind and concluded that no one else could accomplish this task, Ren reluctantly agreed.

“He won’t ignore the emigration of two thousand less fortunate. Not a second time.”

Weeb had been outraged when the slaves were brought into Rabbi from Hellion territory. The Demon Lord expected that he would not forgo the chance to see the village for himself.

Ren nodded. “I will make sure he arrives in Rabbi.”

“Good.”

At this point, Ren headed to the palace, and the Demon Lord began his search for the famed swordsman. With its tyrant fallen, the capital city had erupted with uncanny jubilation. Everywhere the Demon Lord looked, people were drinking, singing songs in a chorus of camaraderie, and madly dancing to the music of bands. There were many tears of joy and couples embracing in the dark. The jamboree showed no sign of fading, even as dawn approached.

There’s so much ruckus... I won’t be able to talk to anyone...

The people of Euritheis were so overjoyed that they didn’t even notice the very catalyst of their celebrations walking by.

“We’re finally free! Drink up!”

“How about you, lady? Loosen up and have a drink!”

“Is that wine? That’s too sweet for me!” the woman whined.

That portly woman must have high blood sugar... the Demon Lord mused and turned into an alley, feeling a watchful but not malicious eye. After finding an empty corner, he leisurely lit a cigarette. “How can I help you?”

A long silence followed before the shadow of the building next to him stirred and a humanoid silhouette appeared from it: Hanzo, the New Kingdom of Xenobia’s leading spy.

“What are you trying to accomplish...? Shaking up the Northern Nations?” she asked.

“Why don’t you introduce yourself first?”

“You have a twisted sense of humor... You know everything there is to know about us.”

How can I?! I’m surprised enough that you came out of the shadows! Unlike Tahara, the Demon Lord did not know Xenobia beyond barely recognizing its name.

“I’m the leader of the Iga of Xenobia.”

“You certainly seem the *eager* type.”

“Iga! I-ga! How dare you mock my organization!”

“It’s just a joke. Don’t take it so hard. And your name is?”

“I-Ichika...” Hanzo answered after an awkward beat, employing a feminine pseudonym.



She had invented numerous aliases and proudly introduced herself by those names, but no one had ever addressed her with them before.

“Hm. Ichika, huh?”

“What?”

“Judging by your name and ninja get-up, do you spell that name with *kanji*?”

“Y-Yes... With ‘single’ and ‘flower.’”

“Ichika. It suits you well.”

“R-Really...? No, it does, doesn’t it? It sure does!” After some initial surprise, Hanzo happily nodded along in agreement. Her day had finally come after living with her brutishly masculine name. “That’s me, Ichika. I don’t care what anyone says. From this day forth, I am Ichika!”

Weirdo... The Demon Lord slowly exhaled a puff of smoke as he watched Hanzo jump with joy.

“Let me ask you this,” he said. “What are you following me for?”

“What for...? You have some gall!”

The Demon Lord’s party and Xenobia were on the brink of war. Their territories were far enough apart, but Xenobia had already sent forces after them. Besides, why wouldn’t they keep an eye on the Demon Lord?

“What are *you* after?” Hanzo countered. “Calling yourself ‘King’ as if to toy with the Jack of All Trades and the Gorgon Company.”

“A simple misunderstanding. Pure coincidence,” the Demon Lord answered honestly.

“Misunderstanding? Coincidence? How can you keep a straight face... I’ve never met a man as inscrutable as you,” Hanzo spat. She saw his actions for what they were: inciting violent conflict between foreign powers. A familiar tactic to her, as it was one of Kongming’s favorites.

“I did not intend for this result, at least.”

“Pitted those companies against each other without meaning to? That’s some coincidence.”

There's no use. She won't listen to a word I say... Having experienced plenty of misunderstandings and overestimations, the Demon Lord was quick to give up on explaining himself. Attempting to at least make the conversation fruitful, he casually changed the subject.

"The leader of Iga, you said? Is there a Japan-like country around here?"

"Japan...? Do you mean Jipang? If so, I've been told it's where our clan originated. I've never been, though."

"Jipang, huh...? I didn't see a nation by that name on the map."

"Map? It's supposed to be an archipelago in the far eastern sea. You wouldn't find it on a map. Some don't even believe the country exists."

"Far east, you say. How far exactly is this—"

"There you are, *King*," a voice interrupted.

Hanzo vanished in an instant as the Demon Lord turned around to find the very swordsman he had been searching for. "If it isn't you, Albert! Anything I can help you with?! Don't be shy!" The Demon Lord hurried back out onto the main street, an eerily wide smile plastered on his face.

Albert instinctively took a few steps back from the unexpected response. "Oh yeah...? You sure are happy to see me. Guess you were looking for me too?"

"Indeed. I have a proposal to make."

"Not again. I told you I'd never join Heaven's Ward. Give me a break."

Heaven's Ward, being a ferocious mercenary company, was always on the hunt for worthy fighters; a famed swordsman like Albert certainly fit that criterion.

"If you accept, I'll give you what you want," the Demon Lord offered.

"Keeping a seat warm for me, high-up? Still not interested, but whatever. As long as you duel me before we talk."

"Oh?! *Duel*, you say?!"

A bit taken aback by the Demon Lord's reaction, Albert still made sure to praise his worthy opponent. As someone who traveled the world in hopes of

making a name for himself, he saw King as a man who'd made it big. "I've always heard you were off your rocker, King, but I never expected you to go this far. Gorgon backing you or not, I'm impressed you went straight for the big prize. Outstanding, really."

"I appreciate the compliment..." the Demon Lord answered with gravitas, having not listened to a word of what Albert had said. Very bandit-like of him, all of his thoughts were concentrated on how to rob the swordsman of his magic-shielding item.

Oblivious to the Demon Lord's intention, Albert proudly declared, "Now that you took out Jack, I'm about to beat you and become the greatest swordsman in the North. I was never good at going easy, so I might kill you... Hope you don't mind."

The Demon Lord rejoiced, welcoming the moth into the flames. "I'm not the violent sort, but if you're *challenging* me to a duel," the Demon Lord loudly advertised, "I have no choice but to accept. In fact, I'm honor bound!" A sordid attempt at sowing the seeds for the crowd to accept him taking Albert's belongings after beating him into the ground.

"Then let's get right to it, King!"

"Winner takes the loser's belongings. Very well!"

"Huh?!"

While the Demon Lord shouted something, Albert had closed his distance to him, ready to draw and unleash the Sword Flash attack that had earned him his moniker. While it was one of the first moves that any swordsman studied, Albert had mastered this attack to the point of it becoming a deadly signature move. His sword had evolved to cut down even demons after decades of blood, sweat, and obsession.

"This duel's mine! **Sword Flash!**"

His supersonic blade swung at the Demon Lord, but Assault Queller nullified the grand sum of Albert's dedication with a single ping.

"A noticeable hit... Forgive me!" The Demon Lord spoke like a character from a samurai period drama.

“Wh-What the... *Hragh!*”

The Demon Lord slugged Albert in the gut. With the powerful impact, he foamed at the mouth and passed out. The Demon Lord searched the swordsman as swiftly as a pickpocket would, and his lips curled sinisterly. *This has to be it. Thanks for the tee up... Rest in peace, swordsman.* After a moment of silence for the still-very-much-alive Albert, the Demon Lord stood, satisfied with the bizarre card in his hand. It was the size of a credit card, with futuristic patterns inscribed on its surface.

“Now... **Analyze Item.**”

The Demon Lord slid the card—now labeled Magic Queller—into his breast pocket: the maneuver of a natural-born thief. *I’ll have to look into its defensive capabilities*, he thought. A higher-end Analysis would show detailed characteristics and numbers, while this basic Analysis only showed its name and generic classification. In this case, that was plenty of information for the Demon Lord.

“As our agreement dictates, what was once thine is now mine!” The Demon Lord declared, keeping with old-fashioned Japanese vernacular as he gave a bow. If Albert had been conscious, he might have protested that he had made no such promise. As the crowd began murmuring about the momentary skirmish, someone applauded. The Demon Lord turned around to find a female samurai wearing heavy, Japanese armor.

“Incredible... Incredible, indeed!” the woman spoke. “The mark of a true samurai!”

“What?”

“Thine hair, thine language... You must be a samurai from Jipang!”

“Jipang... Well, I am from Japan, I guess...” the Demon Lord mumbled, unsure if he could equate the two in this case.

The female samurai flashed a bashful grin and approached the Demon Lord, coming close enough that he could nearly feel her breathing. She seemed to be genuinely excited for their encounter without an ulterior motive. “To meet kin in such a foreign land! Blessed be the Buddha! Let us share in the merriment

tonight!”

“You’re close! Too close!”

“Be not so coy! You must have faced great tribulations in this faraway land!”

“You could say I faced some... Back off, already! You’re creeping me out!”

“Wherefore are you cowering? You should be overjoyed to meet a kinsfolk!”

“You’re creepy!”

“Wha— What have I done to you?!”

This was someone the Demon Lord had to be careful with, for several reasons. For one, the historical Akechi Mitsuhide was the closest thing to a Demon Lord killer in Japanese history. If she truly was the same Akechi Mitsuhide, it seemed like whoever was controlling this world had sent her here to take him down now.

“J-Just don’t get any closer!” the Demon Lord protested. “Distance yourself!”

“Never! I finally found another soul from Jipang! I will *never* let you out of my sight...!”

“Creepy!”

The Demon Lord and the Demon Lord killer were reunited, whether by coincidence or by destiny.

Then Mitsuhide dragged him to a food stand on the street decorated like a Japanese ramen stand, which was unusual in this world.

“This is my favorite establishment!” Mitsuhide said.

“Is that so... Then I’ll be going.”

“Halt! We’ve only just arrived!”

The Demon Lord kept glancing at Mitsuhide without even trying to hide his skepticism. He seemed to be fighting an intense internal debate whether to leave or stay and ask Mitsuhide something.

“Jyube, dear, I brought you your companion.”

“All the way from the inn. Thank you, Madam.”

The Demon Lord turned to the elderly woman and found a bizarre creature with her. The creature appeared similar to a deer at first glance but had a particularly gnarly set of antlers on its head. It was as large as a Clydesdale horse, and the Demon Lord imagined the beast would be quite fearsome on the battlefield. On the other hand, the creature had button eyes and a beautiful coat, making it a rather adorable hulk.

“What is this thing...? The forest spirit from *Princess Mononoke*?”

“What are you on about? This is the proud beast of Jipang, the Umashika.”

“Like ‘horse deer’? That means ‘idiot’ in Japanese.”

“Umashika, I said!” Mitsuhide stroked the neck of the beast, holding up a bundle of silver grass to its mouth. The Umashika, however, shook its head in silence.

“Hrm... I feared foreign grass wouldn’t suit you.”

“Quite the spoiled brute,” the Demon Lord remarked.

“How dare you call him a brute... This is Toshimitsu, my partner!”

Toshimitsu? That’s... The Demon Lord thought of the historical Akechi Mitsuhide’s right-hand man, Saito Toshimitsu. He had not expected to see the brave and loyal samurai as a deer. His usual mask had fallen from his expression as the Demon Lord looked visibly confused.

“Mitsuhide, was it? I’m rather busy, and I have a few questions—” The Demon Lord froze. Mitsuhide had clasped the end of his jacket as if to emphasize her intentions of never letting him out of her sight. The color drained from the Demon Lord’s face.

“I’ll answer all the questions you have!” Mitsuhide said. “Ask away!”

The Demon Lord managed to grunt in affirmation. It was beginning to seem like Mitsuhide was a loner with no one else to talk to, and he didn’t know how to feel about that. Had Mitsuhide failed to make any friends in this foreign land, with only her deer to speak to?

“Tell me more about Jipang,” the Demon Lord carefully ventured.

“Judging by your clothes, you must have been away from our homeland for

quite some time. Let us reminisce about the motherland to our hearts' content!" Mitsuhide went on to describe feudal Japan, as the Demon Lord had expected. The entire concept seemed so bizarre to the Demon Lord, given his existence in this fantasy world.

"The shogun Muromachi, huh...? Nobunaga hasn't banished him yet?" the Demon Lord commented without much thought, but the comment seemed to rattle Mitsuhide.

In Japanese history, the final shogun of the Muromachi era had rebelled against Nobunaga numerous times until he was finally banished, symbolizing the fall of the old reign and the rise of a time when military and financial power would rule.

Not that I expect Jipang to have an identical history to Japan's... The Demon Lord sipped on the wine that had been served to him. It was cheap and diluted, little better than water.

Mitsuhide, too, glowered at the glass of wine. "Hmph. Never thought I'd hear that name in this distant land... Curse it. This *wine* is far from my cup of tea too."

"Hm." The Demon Lord produced his Item Folder and began browsing the sake available to him. He selected the unfiltered nigori, which he expected Mitsuhide to be more familiar with. He chose the *doburoku* variation that wasn't as strong in hopes that his offering would keep Mitsuhide talking.

"Have some of this, and go on."

"That's... A spirit from Jipang! How did you carry it in that scroll in the first place?! Do you study the way of the ninja?!"

"Ninja..."

"Masters of the ninja craft are said to ride giant toads. Do you?"

"Who do you think I am, Naruto?! Of course I don't ride a *toad*!" The Demon Lord tossed back his glass of nigori, then another, then a third.

Mitsuhide visibly gulped. She must have been without sake for a long time. "I will gladly accept your offer." With a polite bow, Mitsuhide took her drink, and

a smile blossomed on her face. “This is it! This is the stuff!” Her ponytail shook, and a slight shade of pink rose on her cheeks. As she tried to pour another glass, Toshimitsu snatched the bottle with his lips and downed its contents.

“Nooooo!” Mitsuhide cried out, “What are you doing, Toshimitsu?!” There were tears in her eyes.

Toshimitsu, meanwhile, happily shook his head, looking too innocent to have committed such a dastardly deed.

“That was precious nigori!” Mitsuhide went on. “Shame on you and your antlers!”

Toshimitsu growled, brushing the ground with his hoof. He looked ready to take Mitsuhide in a fight if it came to defending a drink he enjoyed.

“There’s more where that came from...” the Demon Lord finally interjected. “Go on.”

“Is that true?!”

Fearing that Mitsuhide and Toshimitsu would go on like this until the sun came up, the Demon Lord produced another bottle of nigori and yet another for Toshimitsu. He didn’t know how he felt about some deerish creature drinking a bottle of sake, but he was eager to ask his questions and leave the bizarre pair behind. Mitsuhide relished the drink of her homeland while Toshimitsu licked the sake out of his own glass.

“I rose up to strike down that vile being...” Mitsuhide explained as if she was venting.

The Demon Lord learned more about the current state of Jipang. As Mitsuhide uttered phrases like “the Tiger of Kai” (Takeda Shingen) and “the Dragon of Echigo” (Uesugi Kenshin), he became more and more confused. By the time the historical Mitsuhide struck Nobunaga down at Honnoji, Nobunaga had conquered 70% of Japan. Uesugi was on the brink of defeat and Takeda was already out of the picture. Jipang, as Mitsuhide described it, did not match the historical time line of Japan.

“Didn’t you attack Nobunaga at Honnoji?” the Demon Lord asked.

“Honnoji? I attacked the Gifu castle... Haven’t you been away from our homeland for some time? You sound very much in touch with the state of Jipang.” Skepticism flashed in Mitsuhide’s eyes for the first time, suspecting the Demon Lord to be a spy of a Jipang *daimyo*.

“Don’t worry. I’m not who you think I am. I haven’t even been to your Jipang.”

“Wh-What are you...? You take me for a fool?!”

“I can’t explain it, exactly.” Claiming to have come from the future would not have been accurate. Unlike in this world, Akechi Mitsuhide was a man in Japan and Saito Toshimitsu was not a deer. “Long story short, your mutiny failed.”

“M-Mutiny?! I stood up for the people!”

“Whatever it was, you screwed up stabbing him in the back.”

“D-Don’t say that!” Mitsuhide cried, the nigori in her hand. She was visibly drunk, her face beet-red.

“So you didn’t even last three days. One failed act of betrayal later, I assume you were banished...”

“I-I wasn’t banished! I-I am biding my time and building my strength to...” Mitsuhide began to sob.

“Whoa, what’s with the waterworks...? You’re high maintenance.”

“I am not!” Mitsuhide finally slumped down on the food stand counter.

The Demon Lord scratched his head. While he was as ruthless with women as he was with men, their tableau resembled an overworked businesswoman venting to her boss.

“Can I get something to eat?” the Demon Lord asked the cook.

“Coming right up.”

“Don’t order when I’m crying!” Mitsuhide pummeled the Demon Lord’s arm, her ponytail bouncing all over the place.

The Demon Lord answered without a shred of sympathy, “Your breath smells! And you’re too high maintenance!”

“Stop calling me that! And I don’t smell!”

As their conversation became repetitive, a plate of sauteed cabbage and mushrooms was served. The presentation was a bit bland, but it gave off an appetizing aroma. When the Demon Lord reached for the plate, Mitsuhide snatched it away and began eating off of it.

“I...have been all alone...in this faraway land...”

“Are you going to eat or are you going to cry...? Wait! Your deer-thing looks angry!”

“You’re not eating today, Toshimitsu!”

“Its antlers are lit up like LEDs! What is this Pokémon?!”

This is where the Demon Lord had ended up. After shaking the very foundation of Holylight and its surrounding nations, he was trapped in an utterly meaningless debacle.

Having missed out on his food, he produced a Liver Tartare, a low-rank item that still healed 30 Stamina. As it was poisonous more often than not, the item was unpopular among players.

“What kind of meat is that...? Where are you carrying all of these anyway?!”

“Beef liver. Pairs well with sake.”

“Beef? How savage, to eat the cows that tend the farms... You have been influenced by these foreign ways,” Mitsuhide said, but she still couldn’t help but sniff the air above the bowl of dipping sauce placed next to the liver.

“This is sesame oil with crushed garlic and salt. You dip the liver in here.” The Demon Lord tossed a piece into his mouth and smiled. Liver dishes processed by the Empire were never gamey, but always juicy and flavorful. The spice of the garlic made him reach for another drink.

Mitsuhide’s resolve quickly wavered. “Wh-When in Euritheis, they say... I-I wouldn’t mind tasting a bite.”

“You consider these things savage, don’t you? Please, stick to your guns.”

“Stop being mean! Be nice to meeeee!” Mitsuhide cried, shaking the Demon Lord’s arm in a tantrum.

“What a drunk... Hey, Deer. You want a bite?”

Toshimitsu happily snortled.

“You’re giving Toshimitsu one?! I want it too! Feed it to me!”

“What are you, a toddler?!”

While the Demon Lord was causing a commotion at the food stand, Ren had already sorted out the mass-emigration at the palace and notified the slum residents of their opportunity. She was truly the ideal secretary, working late into the night. The residents of the slums took the news very well and began packing right away. The alternative was a desolate future where they had always been. With even the government funding their emigration, most considered it too good to pass up. Most of them barely had enough possessions to fill a single bag, anyway. Their readiness for change was proving to be a boon. The grand celebration of Jack’s fall in the slums transitioned to a hectic scramble to pack up and get out. The Demon Lord still had plenty of chaos to bring into this world.

The Butterfly Effect

While the capital of Euritheis was enraptured, the fallen men were beginning to assess their losses. One of them was Jack, the former tyrant of Euri, and the other was the unfortunate Gorgon Company. Jack's downfall was arguably deserved, but the Gorgon Company had practically been struck by a stray bullet fired on the other side of the world. Both companies had been on a collision course for some time; now that the spark had flown, the flames of their conflict were only growing.

Gorgon himself stepped up to the front lines in the City States, taking charge of the hunt.

"Has Jack not returned yet...?" Gorgon and his subordinate, the Snake Charmer, were struggling to capture the guerrilla battalions of the Jack of All Trades, who scattered to the wind as soon as Gorgon's men got anywhere close to them. As was the case with all guerrilla warfare, the initiators were at a substantial advantage.

"Don, the enemies are currently—" A young man who approached Gorgon was struck in the face and blown away.

"A young man! You make me sick!" Gorgon wiped his fist with his handkerchief, his fine features contorting in disgust.

"Th-Then allow me. The enemies are—" The young woman was kicked in the face and also blown away.

"A young woman! You make me nauseous!" Wiping his shoe with his handkerchief, his fine features contorted further. As absurd as this might have seemed, Gorgon was entirely serious.

Catherine, who had been standing next to him, decided to spare all present from further trauma by retrieving the report and standing before Gorgon.

"Don... P-Perhaps I should be the one..."

"Yes, please, Catherine." Gorgon's expression immediately changed: he now

wore a charming smile, encouraging Catherine to continue. He seemed content just to hear the sound of her voice.

However, the urgent news from their spy in Euritheis seemed to shake the room: King had defeated Jack.

“Why did King take down Jack...?” Gorgon muttered aloud, leaning into an extravagant chair another elderly woman had brought in. In a matter of moments, colorful fruit decorated the tables around him, transforming the space around Gorgon into a glorified tropical resort. This was a common occurrence for Gorgon; he never tired of trying to impress his adoring grannies and spared no effort to do so.

“A bid for fame...? A false surrender...? Or else...” Various possibilities crossed Gorgon’s mind. While all of them were possible, they were highly improbable to pull off without any help. Heaven’s Ward, no matter how dauntless, was only a group of mercenaries.

“Perhaps they are wiser than I gave them credit for...” Gorgon continued.

“Wh-What does that— Ahhh!” A young woman was blown away yet again, this time by a Wind spell.

“Hold your tongue, you immature girl! My ears!” Gorgon wore many rings on his fingers, each of them containing its own burst of magic. As outrageous as the don was, his subordinates never seemed to learn from their mistakes.

Catherine sheepishly spoke to Gorgon. “D-Don, what is this all about...?”

“Catherine, perhaps that King... No, Heaven’s Ward may have made an offering to us.”

“Truly...?!”

Heaven’s Ward would have been out of their minds to start a fight with the Gorgon Company, one of the leading companies in the City States and which boasted an expansive international trading network. If Gorgon so chose, they could starve out Heaven’s Ward without lifting a finger simply by establishing an underground embargo on food, weapons, and other supplies.

“At first, I thought it might have been a mad grasp for publicity...” An idea

came to Gorgon that Heaven's Ward had offered the Jack of All Trades as a show of goodwill towards Gorgon. "I see. Garnering our favor is the quickest and safest way for them to expand their influence in the west..." Gorgon could just as easily starve out any competition for Heaven's Ward. With dedicated patronage from the company, Heaven's Ward could rule the mercenary industry in the west. "Did King leave Jack there after defeating him...?" Gorgon asked.

"Yes, Don...! That's exactly right!" the man who had brought the news answered from afar, apparently having learned that approaching Gorgon would earn him a fist in his face.

"I thought so..."

Gorgon's reaction drew some confusion from the room. They failed to understand why King had dispatched the enemy leader only to leave him be.

"Don, why did King leave that terrible Jack to be free...? This old hag hasn't a clue."

Gorgon chuckled. "That, Catherine, is a desperate attempt to garner my attention." With a gentle smile, Gorgon went on to thoroughly explain his thoughts to Catherine. King had showcased his abilities by defeating Jack while threatening to keep these battles going if Gorgon gave an unfavorable response. With a spectacular display of their abilities, Heaven's Ward had sent their strongest beast out into the wind—a powerful threat backed up by great confidence. Gorgon couldn't help but feel a sense of appreciation for their brutish methods. "The skill, the timing, the guts... There's something to it..." As a long-standing mercenary group, the Gorgon Company had to respect a straightforward show of strength like this one. It was as if King was even declaring that *strength* conquered all, and no other virtue had value.

"Ajax Kong. Find and contact King in Euri."

"Yes, Don!" A woman with sinister face paint leapt to her feet and bowed. She had a towering figure, her arms large enough to easily choke out a bear. In fact, she had once strangled a monster with her bare hands.

"And a message... That I highly appreciate his strength and consideration. That should be enough for King."

“Yes, Don!”

“But now we have a score to settle. We will take care of all of the pests in our city, along with any remnants of the Jack of All Trades.”

The messenger was sent to King while Gorgon moved to finish off Jack’s flatlining company once and for all.

Meanwhile, Jack departed the capital under the protection of his men and was carried into the fortress that defended the northern border between Euritheis and Milk.

“King... You bastard...!” Jack roared, unable to rise from his bed.

Even after unleashing his hidden power, Jack had been slaughtered in the Colosseum. With such a large audience, he could count on the end of his rule. Many of his own men had fled just seeing his monstrous form. While he had already been feared like a monster beforehand, this was bordering on irony.

“How many fighters do we have...?” he grunted.

“Some have deserted, sir, but we have at least two thousand...!”

Those who still followed Jack must have been those without the means to survive without Jack’s protection.

“Call in all forces and place them on the border against the City States. Gorgon won’t pass on this chance...” Jack grunted the command. “We should have two thousand all together. Mobilize the national army that’s still under our thumb. Regroup while they fight.”

“Yes, sir!”

Jack’s orders would never reach the royal army of Euritheis, as the revitalized king would soon retake control of the force. Even the members of the army who had been bought out by Jack had quickly caught wind of his downfall. Those hyenas had a powerful sense of smell when it came to shifting powers; victory is a fickle mistress. As was natural law in politics, the more lives someone ruins, the less they expect their own life to be ruined.

“King...!” Jack’s mind was occupied by the man with a dauntless grin. He had shrewdly conscripted the residents of the slums and then the audience of the

Colosseum. Before Jack knew it, King was strolling through the capital city like a real king. Jack had faced many formidable adversaries in his life, but never one so brazenly sinister.

Backed into a corner, Jack called on his last resort. “Request reinforcements from the Tungya tribe...”

“Y-You want to let them in from Milk?!”

“I’ve paid off the tribe. Now go.”

“Yes, Boss!”

Once his subordinate left, Jack winced in pain. While his dethroning was unfortunate for him, it would bring liberation to the million citizens of Euritheis. History had proved time and time again that an iron fist always succumbed to an even larger fist.

Meanwhile, a different war was brewing in the village of Rabbi: a great, sisterly battle between two graceful butterflies.

——The village of Rabbi, Holylight.

Escorted by Tahara wearing his tux, Buttersauce Butterfly stood at the entrance of the village. To be precise, Rabbi had long since outgrown its designation as a village. The wealthy Buttersauce had traveled to many major cities, but she had never set foot in a place like Rabbi.

It’s so vast... Like they haven’t thought of a border at all. Cities on this continent were designed to get the most out of a limited amount of land, so civil engineers strove to cram as many businesses and residences as they could on the barren and craggy land. Rabbi, on the other hand, showcased a design of the opposite philosophy. The roads of the village formed a massive grid, each of them ridiculously wide and paved.

Are all the streets paved with stone...? No wonder I haven’t seen so much as one dust cloud... The view of Rabbi was endless and clean. Anywhere else in Holylight, this heavy carriage traffic would have covered every pedestrian and all the cargo in sand. Buttersauce also acutely assessed that the ground below the pavement had been flattened, incredibly accurately, perhaps to protect the

pedestrians from injury and the carriages from damage. *Building a city of this scale out here... Do the neighboring lords approve of my sister...?* A disquieting realization came to Buttersauce. Land was always a limited resource, naturally neighboring other territories ruled by other lords. Rabbi was designed as if there were no territories around it as far as the eye could see.

That parochial sister of mine built a space so liberating...? Buttersauce slightly frowned at the expansive view before her. She had always seen her sister as someone who lamented their family curse, struggled in futility to fight it, and threw extravagant parties to console herself, only to start one fruitless diet after another. Her sister always seemed so hollow to Buttersauce, but she couldn't help feeling a change in her, having finally seen the village. *Hmph. Knowing my foolish sister, there'll be plenty of loose threads.* Buttersauce searched for a lapse in the sprawling settlement, adamantly refusing defeat.

She had come to the business district where the most well-known brands in the country lined the street, each establishment with plenty of elbow room. Not even in the Holy City had she seen this much open space. *That's McDonald, the famous collector. Over there is Bingo, the up-and-coming merchant from Yahooo. She even recruited Artemis...?* Buttersauce calmly observed the row of recognizable signs; her sister's finances and influence made it possible for her to invite any establishment to open a branch here. When she spotted the glimmering, golden temple farther into the village, Buttersauce finally felt comfortable mocking her sister. *That gaudy eyesore...! A perfect symbol of my sister!* She did not know what the building was for, but it was the polar opposite of what she viewed as beautiful. Many common folk and even nobles would fall for the golden allure of a such a construction, but she knew art well enough to see that its glamor was merely manufactured.

Tahara caught the shift in her expression and diverted her attention. "Miss Butterfly, that is the Healing Forest you saw earlier." He pointed to the forest that gave off an almost divine aura, where many villagers lay on their blankets as they pleased. The forest sheltered workers, traders, and even some nobles enjoying their tea atop an expensive carpet. The Healing Forest healed various ailments over time, and people only had to sit beneath its trees to be healed. The grounds were open to the working class for free, but they charged the

middle class patrons one silver coin and noble patrons one gold coin, supplementing the village's treasury considerably. Many nobles traveled from far and wide to experience the miraculous forest for themselves.

"A statement against class?" Buttersauce snarked, watching people of all ranks and statuses blissfully relax and laugh with each other. Her first thought was to memorialize the view as a painting... Which stung her with a slight pinch of defeat.

"See him over there, Miss? An elderly noble who was suffering from back pain. He's perfectly healed now, even enough to regain his strength in his bedchambers, I've been told."

"Wh-What are you... Don't speak of such things!"

"Pardon me, Miss..." Tahara shrugged and grinned in a way that resembled a prankster's. No other man would have dared to say anything of the sort to Buttersauce. "Let me show you to the Fountain of Healing, the new hot spot in our village."

Buttersauce nearly scoffed at the word 'fountain,' imagining a hole in the ground that they had poured some water into. Nevertheless, she quietly followed.

However, she soon came upon the bona fide, breath-taking structure. "What...is this...?!"

The fountain emanated crystal clear light, moving Buttersauce to her core. This was only a natural response—the fountain's water was ever-flowing and ever-pure; it gradually healed its creator when they fought in the area surrounding it. Akira Ono had the audacity to design this fountain to eternally pump natural mineral water from the Alps. The fountain had even generated some unexpected benefits for this world, like improving the quality of foods and alcohol that made use of its water.

"How is this divine fountain in the eastern wasteland...?!"

"Where is this wasteland that you speak of?"

"Where—?!" *Here, of course!* Buttersauce would have shouted if everything around her had not been the complete opposite of a wasteland. She began

rambling instead. “My foolish sister couldn’t have... She wouldn’t understand beauty if it hit her in the face!” She was like a toddler throwing a tantrum; her preconception of her sister had begun to crumble, and that was just unacceptable. She took pride in creating beauty through art, unlike her sister who only threw vain parties.

“You’re right. I didn’t build this town.”

Buttersauce turned to the voice coming from behind her. She couldn’t believe her eyes. A frigid chill shot through her spine as cold sweat trickled down her body, rapidly draining her of the midday warmth.

“It’s been too long, foolish sister...”

Buttersauce even loathed her voice, which was as booming and domineering as ever, but somehow now pleasant to the ears. Butterscotch was nearly unrecognizable after all the weight she had lost. Color faded from Buttersauce’s vision, her world tearing at the seams. Her sister, once as mountainous as her, now carried a stunning, slender figure, her shoulders sloping in an appealing curve. She even had an hourglass silhouette, which made Buttersauce want to strangle her. No one but Butterscotch’s very own sister might have recognized her post-transformation.



“What...did you do...?”

“I can’t hear you, little sister. Speak up, like you always do.” The Madam laughed, but not in a malicious way. She had no need for malice any longer now that she felt so at peace. Even to her sister, whom she had once cut off, she presented herself with serene grace.

“What did you dooooo?!” Buttersauce bellowed, charging at the Madam, who embraced the thunderous charge with a lovely smile. Buttersauce grabbed her sister by her maddeningly slender shoulders, shaking her. “D-Did you sell your soul to a devil?! Tell me! Tell me now! Tell meeeee!”

Even as she screamed, a part of Buttersauce’s mind was still rational. She knew that the curse upon their clan could not be lifted by a single soul given to their devil. If that was a possibility, she would have done so herself long ago. The Butterfly family was cursed by an ancient variety of devil far more powerful than the current iteration of the race. Hellion territory would have frozen over before such a curse was broken. The Madam’s transformation extended beyond weight loss, and Buttersauce had noticed. Her sister’s skin was completely wrinkle-free, brightened almost to the point of beaming. Even her hair was on another level, as if a master artist had painted every strand with a luscious sheen. It parted like silk when touched.

The Madam laughed again. “*Devil?* Is that your first thought? How pathetic, Sister.” This time, she was openly scoffing.

“I gave my soul to the *Demon Lord*. The one who ruled the night in the days of old...”

“Demon—?!”

The Madam removed her sister’s hands from her shoulders and began walking away. Buttersauce had to admit that even from behind, the Madam exuded an allure reserved only for women in their prime. She turned her head towards Buttersauce. “Follow me. I’ll give you a tour of his world.” Her eyes were gleaming powerfully.

Buttersauce quivered, both from this overwhelming sense of defeat and the odd sensation that everything she ever knew to be true was crumbling to the

ground.

Seizing the opportunity, Tahara placed a hand on his chest and extended the other. “Why don’t you *unwind* in the hot springs, Buttersauce?” He dropped the customer-service formality from his tone.

This brazen intrusion into her heart shook Buttersauce even more. *Calm down...! This is all an illusion. She must be using a magical item again!* She had to steel herself just to remain standing. Having stabilized herself, Buttersauce allowed Tahara to escort her to the hot springs resort, all the while the phrase “Demon Lord” reverberating in her mind. *Has my sister gone mad...? But her body... Am I sure that was an illusion?* Any well-to-do noble like Buttersauce wore a powerful item to deflect magic that affected one’s mental state. Nobility couldn’t afford to make deals based on illusions, after all. In Buttersauce’s case, it was a subtle earring. *My magical item didn’t react... Could it be that she really lost that much weight?* Her sister’s unrecognizable transformation, the impossibly grand fountain in the eastern wasteland, a forest with a divine glow, and a golden temple that seemed to outshine and mock the sun...

The rumored man who calls himself the Demon Lord... Really is the Demon Lord? It was a ridiculous thought that crossed her mind. After her sister claimed him to be the ruler of night, she should have called for a doctor straight away. However, Buttersauce had some reason to consider her sister’s claim. *The music box... And the Angel’s Ring...* The former had been sold for McDonald to auction, and she had won it herself. At that time, she had been told that the item originated from a man who called himself the Demon Lord, but she had brushed this off as a tall tale to encourage bids in the auction. Upon pressing McDonald for answers, the only other description he gave of the mysterious seller was that he was “a gentleman from across the sea.” And as for the Angel’s Ring... *A desperate, far-fetched rumor the Holy Church started... That’s all it was supposed to be...* She had assumed it to be propaganda of the Church to regain their dwindling support. The last thing she expected was for the seller to be the bona fide Demon Lord.

A scary thought crept into Buttersauce’s mind at this moment: rumors, rumors, rumors... Many, including herself, had laughed these tales off.

Now that she had seen a desolate village transformed and her sister remade,

the rumor of the Angel's Ring seemed closer to fact than fiction. And, if it was, these facts would shake the foundation of Holylight. *Everything has been painted over while we were laughing this off...* Buttersauce described, true to her artistic nature.

She began to paint a mental canvas with her image of the Demon Lord for the first time. She pictured a fearsome man, carrying the Holy Maiden Luna in one arm and her sister Butterscotch in the other. If all rumors were true, it was safe to assume that the Holy Maiden White was also under his thumb. *Could he really be...Lucifer?! The fallen angel in black who defied the Great Light and was banished from Heaven... The very Demon Lord that ruled the night in ancient times. If such a being has returned to our world now...*

As if to further support her conclusion, an astounding structure came into view: one with architecture completely unknown to her. The building was designed like any high-end *ryokan*, but there was no eastern architecture on this continent. Buttersauce couldn't help but feel something, moving her artistic spirit. *The roof... Looks like fish scales... It's beautiful.* The blue shingles refracting the sunlight must have reminded her of the ocean. She reached for her sketchbook when a strange tune in her ear froze her where she stood.

"Is that a bell...? No..." The mysterious notes seemed to ring in her heart rather than her ears, something that reminded her of a treasured music box.

"A wind chime," the Madam answered, closing her eyes.

The familiar sound took Buttersauce back to a summer day in the distant past. She and her sister had sneaked out of their manor to steal a watermelon from the field and eat it. In this scene from their childhood, their faces were smeared with watermelon seeds as they innocently laughed.

"Your face was even shaped like a watermelon back then," the Madam said as if she had peeked into her sister's mind.

"That's the pot calling the kettle—" Buttersauce couldn't finish the sentence while facing her sister now. She thought she would grind her teeth into dust.

In turn, the Madam gave some warnings on etiquette: to take off her shoes upon entering, to use her inside voice, and to not touch the art on display... As if she was a child on a field trip.

“Don’t you dare patronize me...!”

“I thought you would cause a scene if I didn’t warn you.”

“You know just how to get on my nerves, don’t you!” Buttersauce snarled. She would not have displayed her emotions so crassly with anyone else. Strangely, it was a show of their closeness.

“Welcome, Miss Butterfly!”

Buttersauce nearly groaned in the face of the warning she had just received, as Kyon and Momo in bunny suits greeted her. The revealing outfit and enchanting atmosphere nearly made her snap. The girls were so adorable that she felt hatred for their very being. *Keeping these women at the gate...!* With how miserable they made her, she had to admit that her sister had made a most effective jab at her if that was her intention.

“How long are you going to stand at the entrance, foolish sister?”

“...Bitch,” Buttersauce spat and followed her sister.

The clear glass doors opened on their own to welcome the pair. Buttersauce scrutinized the simple automatic doors, looking for another one of her sister’s tricks, but as soon as she stepped inside, she was met with an incredible interior. The thoroughly polished floor shined like a mirror, so Buttersauce had no choice but to follow her sister’s order to take off her shoes. There were various pattern-dyed fabrics lining the hallway and the calming melody of a Japanese harp came from the front lobby. Every detail was otherworldly.

In preparation for the arrival of the *esteemed* guest, the staff brought out tapestries of various patterns unseen in this world (*karakusa*, *botanryu*, *hittazakurachirashi*) in a marvelous exhibit.

Tahara smirked as he saw Buttersauce in ecstasy. He had even hung lanterns that glowed in amber light all around the resort, emphasizing the eastern aesthetic. While Tahara had no grasp on art, he could dissect people’s minds like a surgeon did the human body. While many nobles oohed and aahed at the casino, he discerned that an artist like Butterfly would prefer some *wabi-sabi*. His trap was effective... Perhaps too effective.

“This one is the *sakura*, isn’t it? I’ve seen it in the City States... Spectacular...”

Buttersauce muttered.

Tahara's plan to escort Buttersauce to the hot springs while having her enjoy the oriental atmosphere was about to face an unexpected obstacle.

"I wonder what this white symbol is. A white swirl on a green background... Could it be? It's the ocean!" Buttersauce remained immobilized in the hallway. She hurriedly took her sketchbook out and began sketching with her mouth ajar as if the rest of the world had vanished.

Time passed quietly... Five minutes... Ten minutes... Buttersauce's historical concentration lasted one hour.

"It's a forest, not an ocean!" she finally said. "It's a leaf *and* a branch..."

Tahara observed her and thought, *It's too much of a hit. Manami's an angel.*

The Madam observed her sister and thought in annoyance, *I want to go enjoy the hot spring already.*

Wisely, both of them held their tongues, positive that Buttersauce would riot if she were disturbed or forcibly taken away from the art piece.

"That's a tiger in that giant painting there... Sleeping under a pine? How inspiring...!"

A more ambitious painting that combined two canvases caught her attention. The tiger was drawn with aggressive strokes, but seemed to be napping peacefully. The adorable contrast finally brought a smile to Buttersauce's face. The very next moment, her smile froze solid. The masterpiece of a generation had been torn asunder, children running out from between the two pieces.

"Tron! I told you, you can't run in the halls!"

"You can't catch me, Aku! Not you or those meddling kids!"

Aku and Tron had burst through the painting in the process of their game.

While Buttersauce stood frozen, the Madam smiled gently and stroked the girls' hair. "You brighten my spirit, you two." She produced two gold coins from her pocket and gave one to each of them; it was a small fortune for most people in this world, but it was an acceptable amount of pocket change for children in the Madam's eyes.

Tron didn't seem to understand the value of the coin, unlike Aku. "I-I can't accept this much money...!" she stammered.

"Yes, you will. Eat lots of good food and wear lots of good clothes. That will please him."

"Wha...? Um..."

"Little Aku, you are a princess. The Demon Lord has a special place for you. Improve yourself every day so you don't end up crying."

"Y-Yes...!" Aku agreed, rosy-cheeked.

Tahara nodded in agreement. Considering how important Aku seemed to the Demon Lord, she must have had incredible potential. He kept an eye on Tron too, as another girl whom the Demon Lord had scouted out himself.

After the girls left smiling, Buttersauce trembled, as if coming out of shock. She didn't understand what her sister was telling the girls, but it certainly wasn't about fixing the severed masterpiece.

"What are you...doing? The painting... The tiger..."

The Madam silently closed the *fusuma*, reuniting both halves of the painting.

"What the hell are you doing?!" cried Buttersauce, outraged and teary-eyed. "Why would you cut a painting like this?! To make a *door*?!"

The Madam answered this quite composedly, having expected her sister's reaction. "You only know of beauty on the surface. You were always too fearful to dig in the mud, to be laughed at. Did you find what you define as beauty after shutting everyone out and giving up on living as a lady?" The Madam didn't wait for an answer and resumed her walk to the hot spring. "My cowardly sister... You're just like the tiger. You fear being torn in two, so you never open up. You only need to reach out. The world will open up for you."

Coming from her sister, the harsh comment resonated with Buttersauce, especially as she was just compared to the masterful painting. "I...didn't give up," she muttered. Instead of trying to make herself beautiful, she had striven to *create* beauty. Still, she was the one who closed the door to the world. Meanwhile, Butterscotch had flung her door wide open, diving into high society.

Buttersauce had lost all words for a rebuttal.

“I...” Buttersauce stammered. She had been hit with one shocking revelation after another ever since reuniting with her sister.

Now, Tahara stepped in. Though they had not coordinated their roles beforehand, he and the Madam had excellent coordination, alternating good cop and bad cop, as if to chip away at her heart and swoop in to claim it. The two of them were clever, through and through. With the added power and money behind them, these rulers of Rabbi had already grown beyond the Demon Lord’s control.

Tahara spoke encouragingly. “Life’s a mixed bag, ain’t it? It can’t be all bad. You, at least, have a path your sister paved before you. The fact that you can follow it, that’s a privilege reserved for family, huh?” He slapped Buttersauce on the back.

She was furious. How dare he treat her, the queen of the arts, this way? “Y-You... Who do you think I am?!”

“Nah. You’re just the same as any female around.”

Buttersauce shuddered at his insolence, but Tahara was serious. For better or worse, he saw every woman except his sister as simply a set of data points: their abilities and alliance. Even the Butterfly sisters, who were two of the most noteworthy celebrities in Holylight.

“Just follow her, already. It’s what younger siblings do.”

“She just *happened* to be born a little earlier than me!”

“Exactly. That makes you the little sister. What are you on about?” Tahara sounded genuinely curious. A younger sister, in his eyes, was someone to be protected, no matter the circumstance. He saw any sibling relationship as abnormal if a younger sister was not protected by their older sibling.

Buttersauce glared at Tahara’s back for a while before beginning to follow. “H-Hey, where was this vase—”

“Keep up. Come on.”

Buttersauce tried to stop at every painting, vase, and flower arrangement, but

Tahara forced her by the hand towards the hot springs, lest she keep them standing in the hall for hours on end.

“Gentlemen and ladies...?” Buttersauce read the signs on the partition of the changing room.

“Some quality sister time, huh?” Tahara pushed her into the changing room.

Her eyes had been stolen by every fixture of the building as if she was walking through a spaceship.

“Took you long enough, foolish sister.” The Madam had already disrobed and folded her clothes in a straw basket.

There were lockers in the changing room, but they were entirely useless. The patrons of the hot springs resort were tycoons handpicked by the Madam, and none of them were concerned with petty thievery here.

“H-How did you get...such skin...?” Buttersauce groaned once again. Now that her sister was naked, she was forced to take notice of her fair and clear complexion.

“This is a woman’s paradise. Follow me,” the Madam declared with utter confidence that infuriated Buttersauce further. She tore off her clothes and followed.

Through the next door, true to her sister’s prediction, Buttersauce was greeted by a whole new world.

“What is this, steam...? Hot water? What?!”

“Why don’t you stop shouting and rinse the sand off you?” the Madam suggested calmly, having experienced this sort of reaction. Still, her lips curled for the special occasion of showing her sister.

“This is called a shower. All you have to do is press this button and it produces infinite hot water.”

“Infinite hot water? Have you lost your marbles...? Whoa!”

The powerful jet of the shower rinsed Buttersauce with a revitalizing sensation.

In Holylight, soaking in water was a luxury, even for nobles. Commoners only cleaned themselves with a wet cloth, and the poor would only clean when it rained. It was unthinkable to waste water like this.

“How long are you going to... How does hot water come out of this thing?!”

“Look around. In the Demon Lord’s world, water is simply infinite.”

“The Demon Lord’s *world*...? You’re...”

In reality, as the Madam had said, hot water was everywhere, filling a gigantic basin, stone tubs, and even large vases for whatever reason. Worse, there were rows upon rows of shower nozzles. If all of them produced the same amount of hot water, Buttersauce could not imagine how much this place cost to run.

“Let’s go. There’s a bath I think you’ll like. A thoughtful gift of the Demon Lord’s.”

“A gift...” Buttersauce scoffed.

Soon they arrived at the herbal bath section. Normally, five infusions were rotated daily; today, the baths were Green Forest and Yellow Beam. The former was a bath of tranquility, reminiscent of a breezy forest, while the latter was a more active bath that tingled the soaker’s senses. The herbal baths were a huge hit among the noble wives, just as much as the hot stone spa and the vase baths.

“The color isn’t bad... Oooh!” Buttersauce stepped into the water of her favorite color, yellow. As soon she sank in, her whole body began to subtly vibrate. Not as if by the technological impact of an electric bath, but a magical beam of energy that unwound one’s core. Buttersauce couldn’t help but close her eyes at the pleasant sensation. Akira Ono had described it as the vibration of a train or a bus to soporific effect. As if that wasn’t enough, a metallic pillow with a system of circulating cold water made her want to fall asleep then and there.

“You can go to sleep, you know,” the Madam said, looking euphoric herself.

Buttersauce nearly followed her sister’s suggestion, but decided that that would mean defeat and stood out of the water. “I-I’m not going to sleep! This is all some trick anyway!”

“You and little Luna. You’re both so eager...” The Madam stood as well, with a faint smile, looking at her sister as if she was a child throwing a tantrum. In a way, the look on her sister’s face stoked in Buttersauce a worse sense of defeat than succumbing to the comfort of the tub. “I have another spot that would be perfect for you,” the Madam added.

“Shut up! What is this place, anyway?! Some kind of illusion that a con man who calls himself the Demon Lord conjured up with sketchy magic! None of this is possible!”

“Stop turning away from reality.” The Madam was perfectly calm without a shred of anger or sadness in her voice. This was the place where she had broken her ancestral curse; no other place was more real to her.

“Come follow me.”

The Madam took her dazed sister by the hand and showed her to the sauna area that hosted various types of rooms, including the popular-on-Earth *jjimjilbang*. Specifically, the Madam had chosen the gem chamber to take her sister to.

“Lie down here,” she commanded.

“I-It’s dark! Wait a minute... What is this stone?!”

Without illumination, the room was filled with gentle steam and darkness. She was not lying on ordinary gems either, but rather a bed of medicinal gemstones: agate, black crystal, petrified wood, tourmaline, green onyx, black germanium, amethyst, and more.

“M-Making a bed of jewels...? You can’t be—”

“Quiet.”

Of course, the stones did more than look pretty. They emitted electro UV frequencies that reduced stress and boosted the body’s natural healing powers. These gently lessened Buttersauce’s pain in her neck, shoulders, and back.

“This is called a gem chamber. Look up at the ceiling.”

“The ceiling...? Oh!” Buttersauce gazed up at the endless expanse of stars on the ceiling.

The ceiling portrayed the observable universe, another of Akira Ono's uselessly intricate designs. It was a magical night sky whose constellations shifted with time.

"A bed of jewels and a sky full of stars... Glimmer is the only thing you'll find in here."

"How could this... How is this..."

The stars formed constellations, showing occasional comets and even stunning aurora borealis.

"What is this place... I don't understand..." Tears flowed from Buttersauce's eyes as she lay on a bed of jewels, feeling a healing pulse course through her body while she watched the galaxy spread above her. To the leader of the art world, this was too perfect of an experience.

"You don't need to understand a thing. This world belongs to the ruler of night..." The Madam's remark was too fitting for the space they were in. It wasn't calculated this time, but the effect of invoking the fallen angel in a space that illuminated the entire universe was incredible.

"H-He really does exist... Lucifer..."

"He does. And everything he says... Becomes reality."

"It becomes reality...?"

"He also said... There are some great enemies to beauty, but they will all yield before hard work and dedication."

Before this day, Buttersauce would have scoffed at such a remark. No amount of hard work or dedication had changed anything for her, which was why she had taken a different path in life. But, now that she had seen her transformed sister and experienced this mystical space, the words rang differently with her.

"My dear sister. It's time for you to defeat your greatest enemy. Yourself."

Now that the ancient devil that cursed the Butterfly clan was long gone, the only battle Buttersauce had left to fight was, indeed, a long and hard one against herself.

Buttersauce understood this now. "Will I... Have enough time...?" she sobbed.

“Time...? Our lives are going to begin today,” the Madam whispered with complete confidence as she continued to look at the stars above. She was determined to shine even brighter than them.

It was only natural that the Demon Lord had taken a liking to the Madam. The man who had constructed the glimmering empire had a strong affinity for those with determination. He had a soft spot in his heart for people like the selfless hero Luna, who created her own opportunities, and Aku, who survived on her own despite her disability.

“I can’t wait for his return,” the Madam added.

“Yes... I would love to meet him. I have so many questions.”

One might wonder what the Demon Lord would think of all these comments. In any case, the Butterfly sisters made a historic reconciliation within this microcosm of jewels and stars.

While the village of Rabbi continued to expand its influence, the man who ruled the night (whatever that actually meant) was dealing with a drunken female samurai, a shameful contrast as usual.

Mass Emigration

To the far north in Euritheis, Ren was enthusiastically announcing the emigration project to bring the people of the slums to Holylight. The residents were taken aback at first, but jumped on the offer once they heard that the government was funding their travel and that long-term work and lodging was guaranteed on the other side. Of course, the offer would have seemed too good to be true for most of them just a day ago.

“Prepare your logistics team in addition to the carriages. It is very hot there, so pack thin layers for the time being. Once we begin marching...” Ren explained to a huddle of royal guards. The sight of them contributed a great deal to the offer’s credibility, especially now that the news of Jack’s miserable defeat and his subsequent escape to the north had spread through the capital.

“King’s out of this world!”

“This is freaking awesome.”

“I hear they pay you bronze medallions every day!”

“I hear they have all the water you can drink.”

“Don’t get your hopes up, idiots! Just be happy we’ll get by.”

The slums were buzzing in the pre-dawn dark, the people apparently thinking that the emigration offer was first come, first served. Meanwhile, Ren calmly gave directions to prepare the caravan. Her directions were extremely on point and considerate to every extent—her aptitude as a secretarial problem solver surpassed even her unparalleled combat strength.

A Communication from Tahara then came through to Ren now that the grand event in the village had concluded.

Sorry to interrupt, he started. How are things going over there?

That’s not an issue. Over here... Ren delivered her report in monotone, to which Tahara guffawed.

The Demon Lord had taken down the mob boss of Euritheis *and* made the king pay to ship them two thousand new workers. He felt he was watching a magic trick unfold.

Flattened him in a packed Colosseum! Even went and blackmailed the king on his way out. I couldn't pull that off.

Not blackmail. We only requested his assistance.

Yeah, right, Tahara chuckled sarcastically. Despite Ren's perspective on the matter, it was blackmail, cut and dry. Ren had taken the head of the tyrannical beast and slammed the thing, dripping with blood, right in front of the throne. The king would have been forced to accept any ridiculous demands they made. The deed was made even more heinous by the Demon Lord setting Jack on the loose, leaving an active threat against the Gorgon Company. Another chilling display of the Secretary's tactics.

As for the Paladin... Ren notified Tahara of the order to make Weeb continue managing the intake of the new population.

Tahara remained quiet for a full second or so. *I get it... It's the perfect opportunity to light a fire under our stubborn Paladin's rear end.*

He must be well received by the people.

Yeah, the Secretary's keeping a close eye on him too. He'll be a killer billboard.

The intelligent and righteous flock to our master. As they should.

Tahara kept to himself the fact that he suspected the Secretary of planning to use the Paladin in an upcoming war against the Tzardom of Light. He heard genuine devotion to the Demon Lord in Ren's voice, just as he did in Yu's. He figured there was no harm in letting her believe that all of the Demon Lord's deeds were done out of kindness. By the same token, he felt the need to encourage this kind of misconception in order to keep an honest girl like Ren on the team.

She answered with a statement that backed up Tahara's assessment. *Master burned all of the dangerous drugs we found.*

Is that so...?

Countless people were saved from the act, I'm sure.

Can't hope for better than that. Tahara remembered how the Demon Lord had orchestrated the drugs to be stolen, giving him an excuse to attack Euri in the first place, only to burn it all in Ren's audience. Tahara wondered how many schemes were ongoing in parallel in his boss's brain. Of course, the Demon Lord was all too happy to eliminate those troublesome drugs as soon as possible, but it came off as a brilliant performance for Ren's sake.

In any case, send those guys over ASAP. We're already way short on hands, and it's gonna be even busier once the fireworks start.

Understood. I will prioritize speed as much as possible.

As plans rapidly moved ahead unbeknownst to the Demon Lord, he appeared in the main street of Euritheis carrying a female samurai in his arms, sparking an audible ripple of surprise.

"Why am I the one carrying her...?" the Demon Lord grunted. "Hey, Deer. Isn't this your job?"

Toshimitsu continued trotting. Whether he didn't understand or chose to ignore the Demon Lord, he seemed to be headed straight towards their inn. His hooves made pleasant *clip-clops* along the road, and the Demon Lord could only chuckle at the creature. To make matters even more strange, the Demon Lord was carrying Mitsuhide in a bridal carry, but only because he thought her armor would dig into his back if he had carried her piggyback. Walking down the main street like this, there was no way he could have gone unnoticed.

"Hey, isn't that King? The one everyone's talking about?!"

"King, go beat Jack into the ground!"

"Did you hear? King can cast a spell that makes your junk *sprung*!"

"For real?!"

"I bet he's about to go *downtown* with that babe... *Whew!*"

The Demon Lord's temples quivered at the rampant speculations from the crowd, its constituents only exasperated by the drunken voice coming from within his arms.

“You call yourself King, do you...? What a way to enjoy this foreign land...”

“If you’re conscious, you’re walking.”

“This is punishment for mocking me... Carry me like I’m a princess.”

“I thought I saw a dumpster somewhere back there...”

“Nooo! You can’t throw me awaaaay!”

“Ew.”

“Don’t say ew! Don’t throw me awaaaay!”

While they continued their back and forth that might have sounded like a couple’s fight, Toshimitsu arrived at the inn. He turned back just once as if to check on Mitsuhide, then walked straight away into the stable.

“So animals can stay here too...”

Various barns and stables stood beside the inn, hosting animals that resembled giant birds, camels, rhinoceri, and even alligators; it looked as if the circus was in town.

“Do people ride those too...?”

“Many merchants keep them as bodyguards... These foreign people know how to tame weird creatures.”

“None of them is as weird as your deer...”

“Never you mind, Mister King! Let us have a toast in my room.”

“You’re going to drink *more*...?” the Demon Lord groaned, frowning as he entered the inn, apparently having more questions on his mind.

The innkeeper glared at the man walking in with a woman in his arms. “Hey, this isn’t the kind of establishment to... Hey, you’re King! Everyone’s talking about you!”

“No, I’m—”

“What a pleasure to have the man of the hour stay at *my* inn! Right this way, you’ll get the best room we got! Perfectly soundproof too...” The innkeeper gave a slimy laugh, reading into the situation that wasn’t there. Of course,

anyone might have if they had seen a man walk in with such a beautiful girl in his arms. The Demon Lord's face further contorted as the innkeeper gave a beaming smile and an enthusiastic thumbs-up. "Jyube, were you? Tonight's the night! Go get him!"

"You misunderstand, innkeeper. I will maintain my chastity until the day of my matrimony— Ahh!"

Having heard enough, the Demon Lord stomped into the room they were shown to, tossed Mitsuhide onto her bed, and kicked the door shut behind him.

"W-Wait...! Don't get the wrong idea!"

"You're the one with the wrong idea, pervert samurai," the Demon Lord spat and produced a bottle of *kiyoshu*, or filtered sake. He couldn't go on without drinking some more. He slumped down into a chair, poured a helping of the sake into a traditional wooden cup, and finished it in one gulp.

"Is that *morohaku*?!" Mitsuhide cried.

"*Morohaku*...?" The Demon Lord laughed at the antiquated title. While Mitsuhide seemed to enjoy her drink more than most, she seemed more homesick for anything that reminded her of Jipang.

That was something the Demon Lord could sympathize with. "Well, these are on me..." The Demon Lord reached into the void and produced a Hot Springs Manju and Mochi. The former was an item that healed 20 HP found in a popular area in the game, the Ogaki Hot Springs. The latter only healed 5, but came in a ten pack, which made it rather useful. Inspired by the news that at least a few elderly died from choking on mochi each year, the Mochi item in the game was often poisoned.

"Is that a *manju*? And *mochi*?!"

"Just try them." The Demon Lord proudly handed over a Manju, confident from past experience that it wouldn't taste bad.

"*Manju*... It's so good... So sweet..."

"You don't have to cry—" The Demon Lord cut himself off. He didn't know how long Mitsuhide had spent here, but he put himself in her shoes. Anyone

who had to work abroad, for example, would soon become homesick. If they had no means of ever returning to their homeland, a taste of home could justify tears.

“G-Go ahead and enjoy them,” he relented.

“You have my gratitude...King...”

“I’m not—” Just as the Demon Lord finally decided to correct her, a Communication interrupted him.

Sorry to interrupt, Chief. Got something to report.

It’s fine. Go on.

The Madam’s sister’s here, as planned. She fell head over heels for the hot springs. Lo and behold, she wants to move here.

They made up in a single night? I’m impressed.

As if. They’re just following the flow chart you drew up, aren’t they? What’s more impressive, in my humble opinion, is knocking off the leader of a country in a single night. Ren tells me you’re gonna squeeze the money to move them here from the king.

The Demon Lord swallowed hard at the flood of assumptions from Tahara. He couldn’t fess up now that he had just punched a guy because he was ticked off. He returned his attention to the room to ground himself and found Mitsuhide neatly lining up the mochi on a portable Japanese grill. Seeing Mitsuhide beaming, the Demon Lord regained his composure.

And you’re passing the whole buck to this ‘King.’ They’d be too scared to let you into Hell, Chief.

I’m the one who’s scared right now! the Demon Lord silently thought, his composure tossed out the window. Before he knew it, he was being painted as a degenerate who framed a total stranger for his crimes. In truth, Tahara only saw it as a positive if he could blame others and reap the benefits. A denial to the likes of “Who is this ‘King’?” would have only come across as weak.

The Demon Lord mechanically Communicated, desperate to get himself out of the massive hole he had dug. *This wasn’t my intention... But accidents do*

happen.

Bah ha ha! It's an accident all right. It's all over before you know it. Accidents are scary, aren't they!

The Demon Lord's intention behind his diction seemed to have been lost on Tahara, who could only picture his boss sweeping away the prize while leaving some rando with the infamy and grudges.

Bravo, Chief. Always a spectacular actor.

I don't know what you're talking about.

Come on, Chief. Burning the drugs right in front of Ren? I'm sure it was a touching show, but I would have died laughing my guts out.

I'm the one who can't catch a breath here! Stop reading deep into everything I say! The Demon Lord decided that their conversation was too dangerous to continue. He rattled off the news about meeting someone from Jipang, which lay beyond the sea, and acquiring an item that defended against magic before stopping the Communication. As exhausted as a marathon runner after crossing the finish line, the Demon Lord finally smelled the cooking Mochi and realized he was hungry.

"I can't recommend using a grill indoors, but I suppose it can't be helped this time."

"I haven't had *mochi* in so long... Thank you!" Mitsuhide said, fanning the fire.

Upon closer inspection, the Demon Lord noticed that the grill was filled with black Fire Spell Stones in lieu of charcoal. Apparently, it had been adapted to this continent.

"There's no fun eating them as-is," he said. "Let's get some condiments..."

Craft Super Rare Item."

The Demon Lord pulled the trigger and crafted a Super Rare item: a Condiment Set, which came in a large cardboard box. It cost him a whopping 50 SP. He must have felt homesick too. There was once a Survival Skill called Condiments, which doubled the effect of an HP healing item. The Condiment Set was a one-use item that produced the same effect.

“You can’t go wrong with soy sauce.” The Demon Lord picked out a bottle from the jam-packed cardboard box, and it vanished without a trace after use, true to its design as an expendable item.

“Th-That color... That aroma... Is that soy sauce?! Oh, I’m so happy to taste the flavors of my homeland this far away!”

Mitsuhide scurried over to sit next to the Demon Lord, watching the binned soy sauce, entranced. Even her cheeks were rosy.

“Hurry. Hurry up and pour it all over, King... Hurry, it’s so thick and tasty...”

“Stop saying it like that!” the Demon Lord rushed to interject, a Yukikaze-shaped silhouette crossing his mind. If the innkeeper could have misunderstood even more what was happening in this room, that remark would have done the trick.

The Demon Lord evenly covered each Mochi with soy sauce, its explosive aroma filling the room as it charred. The Demon Lord and Mitsuhide’s stomachs growled at the same time.

“Wh-What an amazing scent...” Mitsuhide gulped before crooning like a puppy.

The Demon Lord tossed a Mochi into his mouth. The homely taste of charred mochi made him relax in his seat and lean farther back. “I had forgotten how good these were. I could eat them by the dozen,” he said.

“So yummy... This is a happy day!”

The Demon Lord and Mitsuhide shared a smile. While the Jack of All Trades and the Gorgon companies clashed with all of their might along the border, the man responsible for triggering their war was enjoying a slice of paradise in bites of Japanese confections. Insults like “degenerate” didn’t even cut it anymore—a term like “walking catastrophe” was better suited for him.

It was then that Ren came to see that catastrophe, having finished her work for the night. As soon as she entered, Mitsuhide’s eyes widened. She sensed an impenetrable grace in the clarity of Ren’s aura, making her feel even more intoxicated. Mitsuhide treasured old traditions, authorities, and antiquated figures like the General Muromachi. Something about Ren made her cells boil.

“Y-You’re...!” Mitsuhide became speechless, and for good reason. According to her backstory, Ren was the young lady of the imperial family, which was on another level from the rest of the noble families in Japan. For someone from Jipang, a nation resembling feudal Japan, Ren was like a beaming goddess.

“My name is Ren. It’s nice to meet you.”

Mitsuhide blushed. Every movement of Ren’s seemed entrancingly beautiful, and she was compelled into a groveling position, her head and hands on the ground.

“We were just grilling some mochi. Have some, Ren.”

“Thank you, Master.”

Mitsuhide was outraged by the Demon Lord’s brazenness, but noted what Ren had called him.

“Allow me to assist,” Ren added. “Please open your mouth, Master.”

“No, I want *you* to eat some...”

“If you prefer mouth-to-mouth over chopsticks—”

“We’re not newlyweds...!”

Mitsuhide was totally confused about their relationship. At first, it seemed like they were master and servant, but now it seemed possible that they were a couple with an age gap.

“Wait, forget the mochi. How did it go at the palace?”

“All is well, Master.” Ren went on to explain what happened at the palace, and the Demon Lord simply nodded, knowing that he needn’t interrupt the plan executed by Ren and Tahara. He was correct: Ren and Tahara didn’t expect him to take part in coming up with any plans nor to perform any task in them... He only had to provide dominion. Without the Demon Lord of the Empire, the advisors would have begun killing each other due to their stark differences in worldview and morality.

“About the general sent from Xenobia...”

“Xenobia. We’ll have to deal with them sooner or later.”

Another quality demanded of the Demon Lord was the decision-making of a dictator. He wasn't a democratically elected leader, and most important decisions had to be approved by him. For better or worse, the Demon Lord had an uncanny talent as a dictator, to ignore all others and power through his own will. His morality aside, this was a talent not found in many.

"The father of the two sisters did return and they were reunited."

"Just to be sure... Is the father named Sam?"

A hint of surprise flashed in Ren's eyes. "You knew it all along, Master...!"

The Demon Lord awkwardly looked up at the ceiling, the noise of a pachinko parlor ringing in his ears.

"A mass emigration of two thousand... It's going to be a fun trip."

Not to mention the nearly one thousand slaves who had already been moved to Rabbi from Hellion territory. In total, the village would gain three thousand workers in a very short amount of time. Rabbi was no longer the size of a village, but a trade city that had popped up in the middle of the eastern wasteland. The Demon Lord imagined the future hustle and bustle of Rabbi and cracked a grin.

Just then, a strange message on the admin screen appeared as an overlay in his vision, announcing the long-awaited unlocking of more admin features.

—Congratulations!

You've met the requirements to add more areas.

Clinic - 1 Holy Coin

Huts - 5 Holy Coins

Abandoned Mine - 5 Holy Coins

Abandoned Factory - 10 Holy Coins

The Demon Lord roared and rose to his feet. More areas had been unlocked, which would allow him to further reshape the land and the entire world.

Ren and Mitsuhide shook at his outburst, but quietly watched the overjoyed Demon Lord.

He scratched his head and began loudly rambling. “The increase in laborers must have met the requirements! The unlocked areas are well-suited for them. Are the population and their job types tied to unlocking areas? Would more merchants unlock trading facilities? Is it just a coincidence? Or does it have to do with the land expansion to the east?! But why Holy Coins? Why can’t it be another currency?!” The Demon Lord paced around the room, the two beautiful girls completely befuddled. Shortly thereafter he downed his bottle of sake and cackled. At the very least, he seemed completely off of his rocker. “Ren, I’m going to think for a while in the fresh air!” He rushed out of the room, leaving Ren and Mitsuhide behind.

Seeing her master excited made Ren look subtly elated.

Mitsuhide, on the other hand, was on the brink of passing out from nervousness.

“I-I, um... Am Akechi Jyube Mitsuhide...”

“Please, call me Ren.” Ren’s gaze pierced Mitsuhide.



Ren meant no ill will, but her gaze seemed cold at first glance. Mitsuhide felt like she was freezing from head to toe. “Y-You mentioned moving people... I-If I dare say so, I would love to serve as your bodyguard—”

“I need no guard and never will.” Once again, Ren meant no disrespect. It was simply a fact that she was too perfect to require anyone’s help. Her response left Mitsuhide teary-eyed, but her follow-up made her perk up again: “Mitsuhide. I have some questions I want to ask you.”

“A-Anything...!”

Ren wanted to hear details on Jipang. She asked detailed questions and took notes on why Mitsuhide had come here, as well as everything about the country: geography, currency, transportation methods, food, trends, weapons, military, local specialties, the fishing and farming industries, *etc.*

Naturally, Japan never existed in the world of the Empire that once hosted the Game. Neither did any other country, only fictional nations based off of some regions of Earth.

Mitsuhide answered each question, still almost nervous enough to faint. Ren would keep this information until the time came when her master would benefit from it. She was not, and never had been, in a position to make decisions. She only aimed to aid her master’s decision-making as his secretary.

“You know much about your home country.”

“I have traveled the lands in search of a master worthy of serving,” Mitsuhide proudly answered. In fact, she had gathered an incredible amount of information through traveling to every region outside of Ezo (modern Hokkaido) and Ryukyu (modern Okinawa). Those who knew much about different lands would be invited by the *daimyo* at times to tell stories in exchange for payment, or even an opportunity to work for them.

“Could you tell me more?” Ren asked.

“G-Gladly!” Mitsuhide happily told more tales, munching on the manju. She wore a constant smile, apparently pleased just to be speaking with Ren, like a puppy obediently sitting next to its master.

“I-If I may ask... What relationship do you have with him, Mistress Ren...?”

“No need to address me like that. He is my master.”

“M-Master... In what context?”

“Master is my master,” Ren flatly responded.

Mitsuhide would have probed further if she had been speaking to anyone else.

Ren seemed to have grasped Mitsuhide’s personality in this short exchange with her. “I have met many people through serving my master as his secretary. I would trust you much more than I do my colleagues.” She felt no need to go into detail about who her colleagues were.

Mitsuhide looked ecstatic from the compliment. She clung to Ren’s lap, who sat on the edge of the bed. “Trust... Trust! I rose in my homeland to strike down a great evil. But I was deemed a traitor by those around me...!”

“Mitsuhide, I see that you are a warrior who prefers order over chaos. Someone who does not turn a blind eye to evil. Who respects old powers and the strength of humanity. Will you—”

“Mistress Rennnnn! Please hear me! As long as I live, I pledge my loyalty and services to you!”

“N-No, please don’t pledge yourself to me...”

“Noooo! I’ve made up my mind! There’s no going back nowww!” Mitsuhide whined, perhaps from drunkenness, still clinging to Ren’s lap.

Even Ren didn’t know how to deal with this. “N-Not me. You should be—”

“But I want to serve you! I’m going to be your right-hand woman!”

Ren chuckled at the literal tantrum, reminded of a child who worked with her. “Mitsuhide. I need you to guard my master while I am away on my mission.”

“Huh...?”

Ren went on to give detailed instructions to Mitsuhide in preparation for what was to come when she would have to leave the Demon Lord’s side.

Meanwhile, the Demon Lord was daydreaming of his newly unlocked areas as he strolled through the capital city in the light of dawn. *Those are good areas... Once I have a Holy Coin, I'll give Yu the Clinic.* She would surely die of ecstasy at the mere thought of it, various ideas running through her mind.

The Demon Lord stepped over a drunk on the ground, making his way through the bustling streets littered with bottles, clothes, and all sorts of trash. *It's like Shibuya after Halloween night...* The analogy was not inaccurate; for the people of Euritheis, this was their liberation day.

Drunken voices could be heard all over the city.

"Now we can run our businesses however we want! All thanks to King!"

"King this and King that... He's an outsider."

"And what if he is? He changed this country for us!"

"Outsiders damaged the name of Euritheis..."

"What do you mean, *name*?! There's no power to a throne that allowed Jack to oppress us like that!"

"You want to say that again...?"

The Demon Lord shrugged. He had removed Jack without any foresight whatsoever.

But now that I'm in this situation... If I put this country under my control, would that unlock more features? What if I make it a client state? The Demon Lord couldn't shake the feeling that the increase in his laborer population was the cause of him unlocking his new features. Previously, the admin screen hinted that actively exploring the world helped unlock features. *Whether it's by population or exploration, there's no harm in having more of them...* Taking over and ruling entire nations for such a selfish reason might seem ludicrous, but the Demon Lord had no reservations whatsoever when it came to unlocking all of his admin features. *There is a way.* After seeing Mitsuhide's grill, the Demon Lord had reaffirmed that this world had no form of fuel. Spell Stones served as a substitute, but there was no charcoal, coal, oil, or electricity. *The abandoned mines can produce infinite coal and charcoal. Even the other materials...*

Of course, a real mine would not produce charcoal. In the game, however, there was a need for players to maintain their body temperature in cold areas. Fire was a necessity to avoid hypothermia and cook their hunt. The Abandoned Mine was a brawl site, since killing another player for resources was much faster than mining them. *I'll have those from the slums live in the Huts... Nothing but rundown buildings there, so they won't be happy about it...*

The Huts area was a recreation of the poverty of Japan's yesteryear, packed to the brim with barracks and old apartments. The area was avoided by most players during the game because it yielded no good items, but it was designed with the backstory of having housed five thousand residents at one point. The housing there didn't have means of bathing or even running water, but there were several wells and a few public baths. Some houses even had hearths, old-fashioned blow-dryers, rotary phones, and black-and-white televisions; it truly was an homage to the bygone era of Japan. Since each unit came furnished with a coffee table, an electric fan, fluorescent lights, an old refrigerator, and a paper-thin floor mattress, they could be used as emergency housing.

I still have a long way to go... But I'll set up areas that will blow their minds one day... The Demon Lord lit his cigarette with determination. Other areas in the game included Government Housing, Residential Area, Suburbs, Highrise, and Luxury Resort. Who knew what would happen to this continent when those areas came to this world.

I feel bad, but the workers will just have to stick it out in the Huts for a while... the Demon Lord contemplated, but only time would tell if the workers would really be unhappy with their new accommodations.

While the entire city was buzzing with excitement, the Colosseum was an absolute mess: drunk men fighting in the middle of the ring as others bet on them. Without Jack's dominion, all gambling was fair game.

Are those tents a makeshift field hospital...? The Demon Lord approached the set of tents with a cross on each of them to find a familiar man: Endjoy. His rear end was sticking out as he laid face-down on a cot, screaming something at the nurse. "Hey! Be gentle with that ointment! I got a burnt ass!"

"B-But I..."

“You’re lucky, getting to feel up my ass... I bet you’re getting hot and bothered too. Heh, if you want, you can reach around and—”

“S-Stop it! Please!”

The Demon Lord sighed at the egregious sexual harassment. He couldn’t stand to watch. “You are a combination of pathetic, miserable, cringy, revolting, and ludicrous.”

“Hey! Who just said...that...?” Endjoy saw the Demon Lord’s exasperated expression and turned away.

The Demon Lord, however, was not letting him off that easily. “You talked about making it big someday. I didn’t think you meant making *it* big.”

“Dammit, how do you always find me at the worst times...?! ”

“It’s good to voice your aspirations, but are you putting in the effort to help achieve them?”

“Shut up! One day everyone on the continent will know my name!”

The Demon Lord could only chuckle, knowing that success would not find its way to those who fail to put in the effort. “You’re an adventurer, supposedly. Do you have any plans to succeed in that profession?”

“Hmph! That’s just a temp job. One of these days, I’m gonna get a huge gig and make a fortune. Chicks will be all over me, including Mikan.” His bravado was juxtaposed with the fact that his rear end was still exposed, not to mention that he had nothing to his name at the moment.

And the Demon Lord was happy to point that out. “No job, no money, no girlfriend. Are you playing on hard mode?”

“Shut up, I said!”

After thoroughly mocking Endjoy, the Demon Lord did show some mercy by giving him the news of the slums emigrating to Holylight.

A few days later, Ren was ready to leave with the residents of the slums in tow. A caravan was marching down the main street, consisting of the elderly in carriages, those pulling all of their belongings in wagons, and mothers holding

their children's hands. They all looked rather worse for wear, their faces and clothes worn out and dirty. They were surrounded by soldiers on horseback who were there more to transport rather than protect them.

The other residents of the city poured out into the streets to gossip.

"What's going on over there...? Are all of them from the slums?"

"They're finally being kicked out, huh?"

"Now that Jack's out of the picture, the slums are getting cleaned out."

It looked nothing short of forced eviction with the former residents en route to the slave market. The city was still rife with discrimination against the slums, leading some to openly point and mock. Since the slums were often the epicenter of disease and brawls, many in the city were relieved to see them go. Their tone changed, however, when they saw the minister atop a carriage in the middle of the caravan, who kept glancing back at the castle with a victorious expression, much to the confusion of the crowd.

"Why's the minister there?"

"He's always been kissing up to Jack..."

"He must have been put in charge of selling off the slums."

"Lucky for him."

"Heh. At least this'll clean up the city. Good riddance."

Even the jeering crowd fell silent when Ren, the rearguard of the caravan, came into their sights. They were entranced by her beauty, but also felt that she was on another level of existence, seeing her *Ningen Mukotsu*. In fact, Ren was an apex predator, a ruler among rulers. Her long black locks and eerily red spear, which almost looked drenched in blood, gave off the impression that she was Death incarnate, bringing with her the inescapable end. The people of the city fell entirely silent.

Battle of Wits

——Euritheis, Northern Nations.

Tranquility had replaced the uproar of the capital now that Jack and most of the slums had left the city. The people now were wearing calm faces, making the streets quite idyllic. The Demon Lord was enjoying some R&R, which consisted of his usual drinking habit and the occasional sightseeing. His wandering about, however, would not be in vain, as the information he gained would surely serve him well in the future. After his time in the city of Rookie, for example, the Demon Lord had adapted their adventuring system to benefit his village.

“Your Impe— Sir King, that is the water main of this country.”

“Hm. That’s a grand river.”

Mitsuhide was all too happy to take the Demon Lord on another tour of the city. The wide river flowed from the tall mountains in Edogawa through Euritheis and into Milk to the North. The river ran full in the summer, but much less so in the winter.

“Your Imperi— There are wells in the city as well.”

“Stop trying to call me that!”

Mitsuhide had discerned Ren’s master to be the Emperor himself, or at least a member of the imperial clan. The alias of “King” suddenly made sense to her upon this realization.

No, no, no! I cannot let this misunderstanding slide! The Demon Lord seethed. This was after he had repeatedly denied this constant assumption (even shouting at times) before finally compromising and accepting the name of King.

“L-Listen! I don’t know how many times I’ve told you, but I am not—I repeat—am *not* imperial nor a majesty! It’s disrespectful! Do! Not! Call me that! I’m not being humble! Got it?!”

“Crystal clear, Your Imperial Maje— Sir King!”

“Can’t you at least *try* to inspire some confidence?!”

As the pair went on, Toshimitsu approached the river and drank from it. Soldiers nearby started towards them, but saw King and halted. Naturally, the water of the river belonged to the kingdom and was highly regulated. Residents had to pay the soldiers on watch to even take a bucket full of water.

“Is the water expensive?” the Demon Lord asked.

“Two to five bronze coins per bucket, this time of the year. Prices go up in winter, so many stockpile water while it’s cheap.”

“A bucket a day is hardly enough...”

Drinking water was one thing, but laundry, cooking, and even washing dishes required water. The poor made a bucket last for days and sometimes shared a bucket among themselves. They only bathed or washed their clothes when absolutely necessary, which explained why they were visibly unhygienic.

The poor people of this world survive off of ten dollars a day... the Demon Lord estimated rather accurately. Most of the impoverished made a living by hauling or processing trash or sewage, collecting scraps, cleaning the drains, raking leaves, shining shoes, and patching up cookware. They might receive the occasional gig to transport heavy cargo, but most clients turned them down for fear of them dirtying the cargo. Their lives contained no shred of hope for the future.

“I pay out-of-work adventurers five bronze medallions for a day’s labor...”

“That’s a very fair, even generous, wage. They must risk their lives to hunt monsters in dungeons, after all. One injury could end their career too.” Despite risking their lives, an adventurer’s pay was unstable. Mitsuhide wondered what adventurer wouldn’t prefer a safe and stable job instead. She was right about most workers who ended up at Rabbi. “On the other hand... There are plenty who chase the dream of scoring a big game and making a fortune in the dungeons.”

“Stable day labor or swinging for the fences... Neither’s much better than the other.” The Demon Lord once again thought that the best course of action

would be to determine which laborers were fit for what job so they could train experts in each field: working in the mines or factories, for example. The newly unlocked Abandoned Factory was an automated assembly line for the most part, but it still required human workers to function. People needed to supervise the machinery and be ready to shut it down in an emergency. Transporting the produced goods would especially require many hands since there were no forklifts and no trucks, and therefore no means whatsoever to carry a large quantity of cargo at once.

In the Abandoned Mine, I can make firewalls, bulletproof glass, plastic and titanium sheets, liquid fertilizer, and old appliances... Not an impressive line-up, the Demon Lord mused, remembering his design. Bulletproof walls and glass could be Combined with a Base to increase its defenses, while plastic increased a Base's durability. Of course, the Abandoned Mine had never been functional in the game, but the Demon Lord expected it to fully function in this world. Still, he would need an advanced facility to produce the latest appliances or more complex equipment.

"There's still so much I need..."

"I'm not sure what you're talking about, but I would be happy to aid Your Imperial Maj— you and Mistress Ren, Sir King!"

"No thanks."

"Are you going to leave me?! Why, just last night, we indulged in those white, sticky—"

"Wh-What are you talking about?!" The Demon Lord rushed to cover Mitsuhide's mouth, but the damage had been done. He spotted the soldiers whispering amongst each other by the river. That particular description of mochi was practically x-rated. Taking notice of the peaceful squabble between Demon Lord and Mitsuhide, a man screamed.

"Ahhh! Th-The monster...!"

"Eeek! He's still in the city, Eyze!"

"You moron, stop saying my name! What if he remembers it?!"

"D-Don't choke me, Eyze! Stop it, Eyze!"

“Damn youuuu!”

Most members of the Jack of All Trades had fled north with their leader, but Eyze remained in the capital, refusing to sink with Jack’s proverbial ship. His partner followed suit. They had expected King to be in fast pursuit of Jack, absolutely not wandering about the capital.

The Demon Lord glared sharply at Eyze, who had seen through his Stealth Stance just the other day. He felt some special power within those eyes.

“You seem terrified... What do you see?”

“Ahhh! P-Please don’t kill me...!”

“Answer the question.”

The Demon Lord took one step towards him and Eyze stumbled backward. He would have fled if his legs hadn’t betrayed him. His rookie partner had already fallen on the ground, eyes rolling back.

“I-I’ll answer anything! Please don’t kill me! I-I don’t want to become one of those *afterthoughts*!”

“Oh...?” The Demon Lord grimaced. Those eyes were special in a different way than Tron’s were. Whether he had been born with it or acquired a skill unique to this world, it was a power that did not exist in the game. “Interesting. Do you see the dead, or their ‘afterthoughts’? Or the color of their souls, perhaps? Or are they numbers?”

Eyze was finally backed up to the outside wall of the lookout shed, where the Demon Lord cornered him by slamming his hand against the wall beside Eyze’s face. He wasn’t letting this mouse slip away from his fingers.

“N-No... I just see *dangerous* things. I haven’t done anything! I have no animosity towards you! Please believe me!”

“Dangerous, huh? Why don’t you elaborate...?”

Flustered as he was, Eyze managed to explain the powers of his eyes. While he only vaguely understood their properties, it was an extremely rare skill called Prognostication, Warning Signs, or Death’s Scythe. It was a broken skill, far beyond the likes of a sixth sense. Unfortunately for Eyze, its Skill Level was

nearly capped, providing no benefit to Eyze's quality of life. How could anyone who sensed danger and death from a mile away take on any worthwhile venture? Sometimes life called for a leap of faith, and Eyze had spent his giving up on every risk before he'd even tried. This precious, rare skill had sabotaged his growth, prevented him from taking on challenges, and broken his courage before it had a chance to grow.

"That's why I kept running away... Avoiding danger, being smart, and keeping a safe distance..." His explanation had devolved into griping, as he had clearly been wanting to get his feelings out somehow.

"Visualizing danger and death... That was your excuse for inaction, huh?"

"E-Excuse...? Someone as strong as you would never understand..." Eyze sulked, clenching his fists.

"Rejoice. Your life will change today. In fact, it already has."

"Huh?" Eyze's eyes widened.

"You're hired. If you want to change, come with me."

"Wh-What are you..."

The Demon Lord slapped Eyze's petrified shoulders. It was already decided in his mind that he would take the man back to Rabbi. "What a man you are! Your talent will bloom under my rule! It's done. Just so we're clear... You're not going anywhere."

"Wait, wha— Wait...!"

"You mentioned the one passed out over there has potential too. Then you're both hired. Don't worry, I provide plenty of benefits. He'll only cry tears of joy." The Demon Lord continued with utter disregard for the free will of others, a testament to his tyrannical nature. Eyze felt like he had been swept up in a tornado out of the blue. "Kondo's and Tron's eyes have the village covered, but I believe in days off. With four watchful sets of eyes, our security will be fortified." The Demon Lord envisioned a monitoring team with Kondo, who had already set up numerous CCTV cameras and facial recognition systems around the village, at the helm, but the Demon Lord was ready to bolster it some more.

“H-Hold on... I haven’t agreed to anything!”

“What’s to think about? How much were you being paid here anyway?”

“What? W-Well, mine...was a gold coin and five silver coins... His was seven silver coins, I think.”

The Demon Lord rapidly converted the currency in his mind: Eyze was paid about 1500 dollars a month or 60 dollars every work day, and his partner about 700 dollars a month, which was less than 30 dollars a day. Guard duty, as was the case with most modern security guards on Earth, made for slow work. If nothing went wrong, the day passed without them doing much of anything at all. It was unthinkable on this continent to pay top dollar for jobs that *looked* like no job. Even Jack, who understood the importance of keeping guards on watch, couldn’t pay his guards a generous wage for fear of the rest of his company taking offense to it. In any world, recognition seemed hard to come by unless impact was *visible*.

“They made a movie about finding criminals before their crimes were committed, and your power is far less dystopian. You will have the hero’s pay you deserve when you work for me, I guarantee it.” The Demon Lord inscribed something on the back of his business card and thrust a gold medallion into Eyze’s hand, blinding him with its glimmer and weight. “This is your starting bonus. My secretary is taking the residents of the slums to the village of Rabbi in Holylight. Find her and give her this card.”

“Y-Yes... Sir...?”

Eyze stood there dumbfounded long after the Demon Lord had left. The card in his hand indicated each of their monthly salaries: a gold medallion for him, and seven gold coins for his partner. At over ten times their previous pay, Eyze would have laughed it off as a bad joke if it wasn’t for the heavy gold medallion in his hand. This was no dream, but a reality.

A hero... Me? A hero? Eyze’s mind spun at a word that seemed so foreign to him. Perhaps everyone once dreamed of becoming a hero until ruthless reality knocked them upside down.

Eyze stopped dwelling on the word and turned to the glimmering gold medallion. Before he grasped the concept of heroism, he had to deal with the

small fortune in his hand.

“H-Hey,” he called to his partner. “How long are you gonna lay there?! Snap out of it! Look at this!”

“Eeeek! Don’t kill me, please!”

“Stop cowering already! Look at this! A gold medallion!”

“Aaahhh! It’s so bright!”

“Let me talk!”

Eyze and his partner rushed after Ren and joined the march for Rabbi. They would not reach their new stomping grounds for some time.

For a few more days, the Demon Lord continued his sightseeing spree of the capital, making himself invisible at times. He browsed the shops that lined the main streets and walked down a few alleys. With the Jack of All Trades having crumbled, there were far fewer drug deals on the streets, but the same could not be said for houses of ill repute. Ladies in glimmering dresses stood at every corner, tugging on the hands of men passing by. Every pub and brothel was filled, the people of the city drunk with freedom.

I think I mentioned this to Luna before... But there’s no nightlife in Rabbi. There were plenty of restaurants, but no establishments reserved for adults. He had no aversion to brothels and other sex services—in fact, he even considered them vital for any major city, serving to reduce stress and prevent sex crimes. *I might as well make it the biggest red-light district this world has ever seen. Who knows a lot about that kind of thing...?* The Demon Lord’s thoughts wandered to a vast city district beaming with neon lights.

Meanwhile, Ren and Mitsuhide were Communicating with each other on a nightly basis. Ren was apparently giving her detailed instructions for what was to come in addition to catching her up on current progress.

Some time after Ren’s departure from Euritheis, Ajax Kong from the Gorgon Company arrived at the capital city.

“Sir King, a messenger has arrived from the Gorgon Company.”

“Mm.”

The Demon Lord was drinking wine bright and early again, but the news sobered him. By now, he had been informed by Ren and Mitsuhide how complicated things had gotten around the city, and he already felt overwhelmed trying to invent a solution to all of it.

They're finally here... The Demon Lord couldn't help but wonder how he ended up in this position. It started with a tiny event that rapidly spread until a massive misunderstanding was causing violent clashes near the border. *Apparently they were at each other's throats anyway. Why don't they keep me out of it...* the Demon Lord thought, conveniently forgetting that he was the one who had struck the spark. Now that the embers of conflict between the Jack of All Trades and Gorgon companies had grown into a raging wildfire, even he felt obligated to attempt a bit of damage control. Setting his glass down, the Demon Lord reluctantly stood from his chair. *What is 'Heaven's Ward' even supposed to mean, anyway?! What a stupid name, like they're some bosozoku from back in the day...* Again, he seemed to have forgotten that he had created an insanely powerful and cliched *bosozoku* avatar. In his defense, this really was a bizarre situation in which he had been roped into the strange group with the stupid name. *Whatever. I'll just play it off. I really don't know anyone from this Heaven's Ward, let alone King.* He really didn't know them, which made matters all the worse. Now, however, the Demon Lord had become more King-ly than King himself, which was just too ridiculous.

“Fine. Let's go...”

“I'll accompany you.”

“Mm...”

Mitsuhide gleefully took her place beside him, and the Demon Lord grunted. Her ponytail bounced joyfully as they walked. Perhaps under Ren's orders, Mitsuhide kept herself by the Demon Lord as much as physically possible, enthusiastically taking part in their reconnaissance. After learning that pushing her away would trigger her to wail or thrash about, he had resigned himself to giving her free rein.

“Who is this messenger?” he asked.

“A fearsome warrior who may put up a good fight against the fighters of Jipang.”

“Oh...?” the Demon Lord responded with interest.

While he found Mitsuhide annoying at times, she was perfectly capable. In history, Akechi Mitsuhide was a bold and calculating military genius who was well versed in etiquette, tea-making, and *haiku* composing. The Demon Lord had to admit that she was, under normal circumstances, exceedingly polite and graceful. Despite her adorable appearance, she had shown gallantry in the Colosseum, but acted like a toddler at times. She was a strange woman who seemed to change shape depending on how he looked at her.

“Sir King. I would love to bake more *mochi* with you once this is all settled!”

“Who knows what you’ll start saying if we do...”

“Wha—?! ‘White’ and ‘sticky’ are perfectly accurate descriptors for it! The fault lies in the beholder! I haven’t said anything that—”

“M-Mitsuhide! I’ll get you mochi later, just shut up while we’re in public!” The Demon Lord covered her mouth, fearing a repeat of his embarrassment from the other day.

“Y-You’re a bit forceful, Sir King... You always bind and gag me with your girthy arms—”

“You’re doing it on purpose, aren’t you?! Huh?! What kind of samurai wears a ponytail, anyway?!” Covering her mouth, the Demon Lord yanked on Mitsuhide’s ponytail.

The interaction might have come across as flirtatious, especially since Mitsuhide looked like she was enjoying herself. After a period of near isolation in this foreign land, she seemed to be having the time of her life.

The people of the city, however, watched the pair as if they had a glob of sugar stuck in their throats.

“That’s the mighty King, is it...? Glad he gets a hot chick like that...”

“The damn flower has bloomed...”

“Grr... Mister King is mine, you weird-looking harlot...!”

As passersby whispered various comments, the pair finally arrived at the luxury inn where the messenger awaited them. Mitsuhide led the way, apparently familiar with the layout of the place, until they came to the designated room.

“Hear ye, hear ye! Bow before my Master!”

Who’s your master?! The Demon Lord swallowed his words, minding their company. He looked into the room to find a great black hill sitting in it.

“So you’re the infamous King...” the mountain said.

What the hell?! That’s a professional wrestler, not a messenger!

A truly fearsome woman in a flashy costume sat before them wearing hard black boots, a punch perm, and star-shaped face paint. At first glance, one really wouldn’t be remiss in identifying her as a violent female wrestler.

“I see how you’d want to take on our don. Haven’t seen a face that scary in a while.”

That’s my line! Have you looked in a mirror?!

“Don’t glare at me like that. I’m a scared kitty under this facade. You’re gonna make me tuck my tail between my legs.”

I’m the one who’s scared! Go back to the ring! The Demon Lord took a seat, careful not to make eye contact, and lit a cigarette. He felt like he was facing down a lion in a cage, but he slowly let out a puff of smoke to conceal his fear.

“I almost forgot. I’m Ajax Kong, nice to meet ya.”

The Demon Lord nearly pointed out that she was practically a carbon copy of a famous female wrestler from Japan, but only took another deep drag from his cigarette and tapped some ash into the ashtray on the table.

“Here’s the message for you from our don, King... He gives high praise for your guts and your skills.”

“Oh?”

The Demon Lord glared at the ceiling, maintaining an appearance of gravitas, as if he was deep in thought or planning his next move. Ajax saw King as a

formidable man who carried with him the same brilliance as her master Gorgon, in addition to his strength.

“What’s your answer, King?”

“Answer, you say... Then let me ask you this: what does your don want from me?” the Demon Lord finally asked, being too lazy to form even a guess on his own.

Ajax Kong seemed at a loss for words. “What does he...?” She had only come to relay the words of her wise don. She had been told by Gorgon that her message would suffice.

She was a fighter through and through, not a scholar. She wasn’t someone Gorgon usually used as a messenger, but she might have been appointed as a form of competition against King, who insisted on showing off his strength in front of a crowd. Gorgon was also concerned that King would not have appreciated the company of a scholarly advisor. Fighters on the front lines of war and those who schemed in the safety of their territory never seemed to get along too well.

“But I... Delivered the don’s message...” she muttered, not having expected a response like this. She was a natural at clubbing and strangling enemies to death. She had never taken part in a diplomatic battle that happened entirely in the subtext of a conversation.

Gorgon’s thoughtfulness, which had been cultivated by experience, had completely backfired. If the message had been delivered to the real King, or any other member of Heaven’s Ward, they would have jumped with joy that the don of the Gorgon Company had recognized their strength. That was the jackpot any mercenary dreamed of.

But the Demon Lord had not so much as raised a brow at the compliment, but returned an appraising look and asked, “You *are* Gorgon’s messenger? Don’t tell me you’re on a fool’s errand.”

Ajax Kong writhed in her seat, knowing that her response might embarrass her wise don. She used what few brain cells she had and came to a simple conclusion. “The d-don... Must want... Jack’s head.”

“Must? Where’s your confidence?”

“I-I’m sure of it! The don does want Jack’s head...” Ajax squeezed out, wiping the sweat from her brow. Her enormous body shook with fear of the repercussions if she were to be sent back to the don without receiving King’s answer.

Meanwhile, the Demon Lord was also confused. *I already beat him up...* He recalled the man he had defeated, sprawled on the ground of the Colosseum. He wasn’t an adversary worth revisiting, but he seemed like the only way out of this bizarre predicament.

“Jack’s head, you say? Then have twenty-one holy coins ready...” the Demon Lord proposed, being a bit playful for once. Names like Jack and King made him think of playing cards, so he pulled out the number associated with the game of black jack. Ajax Kong didn’t so much as snicker, but looked dead serious. *Guess that was a miss...* he thought. He *had* meant it half-seriously, knowing he’d need all the holy coins he could get to set up the newly unlocked areas, but he hadn’t expected such a heavy bout of silence.

The Demon Lord snubbed out his cigarette and put another one in his mouth in an attempt to buy some time. Mitsuhide proudly produced a lighter from her pocket and lit it for him. *What did Ren tell her? What am I, a mobster?!* Mitsuhide sat there, her ponytail bouncing in its place.

Ajax Kong, on the other hand, was nearly smoking from her ears. “H-Holy coins... Twenty-one of them...?”

The holy coin drastically fluctuated in value, so it was treated more like a volatile stock than a currency. At this time, one was valued at least a hundred gold medallions, or two million dollars. Historically, there had been a time when a holy coin was worth three hundred gold medallions for a good time, and even six hundred for a short burst.

Ajax Kong was not good enough with numbers to accurately grasp this demand. Having given up on her mental math problem, Ajax said, “All right, King... I’ll give your message to the don.”

“What?”

“What...?”

The exchange left an awkward silence, which the Demon Lord attempted to escape by clearing his throat. He added, “I-Indeed. Give this to him.” The Demon Lord produced some charcoal and coal he had taken from the secret base. He had no interest in Jack, but he had been looking for a buyer of the fuel he would be digging out of the mines. He had a vague plan to secure enough for the village to use and make money by selling the rest.

In the game, charcoal was used mostly for mending or modifying weapons, but also sometimes in charcoal bombs. These were often a source of trouble for supporting players that handled production and restoration for their party on the back end.

“Rest assured, the don will receive them...” Ajax Kong rushed to her feet and left the inn, worried that she would commit a faux pas while dealing with a man of his like.

Once the messenger was gone, the Demon Lord let out a sigh of relief. He had been anticipating her springing a wrestling move on him the entire time.

“Sir King! Incredible negotiations! You completely bewildered her!”

“It appears so...” The Demon Lord dragged on his cigarette, wondering if he had really made the best move.

Mitsuhide, at least, seemed ecstatic at what she took to be masterful diplomacy. “We must celebrate with a drink tonight!”

“A drink...? Yes, every happy occasion calls for a good drink,” the Demon Lord laughed and left the inn with Mitsuhide, happy to snatch an excuse to day-drink.

“Now, Sir King, let us bake more *mochi* back at the inn!”

“Not so fast. Where’s the fun in eating the same food all of the time? Let’s have Rice-and-Herb Porridge, for our health.”

“R-Rice porridge?!” Mitsuhide leapt onto the Demon Lord’s arm out of excitement.

It was already a rare item in the game that healed 50 HP and Stamina. In this

world, the item was nothing short of a miracle. If someone on their deathbed were to take a bite of it, they would begin dancing on the spot.

“I finally understand why I was sent to this foreign land! It was to serve you and Mistress Ren!”

“W-Well, all I want is for you and Ren to get along...”

“What is that supposed to mean, Sir King?!” Mitsuhide demanded, apparently having a sore spot for rejection.

The Demon Lord, annoyed, spoke his mind. “You *are* annoying...”

“Nooo! I’m not annoying! Tell me you love me!”

“Get off of me! What are you, a snake?!”

As the pair walked out acting like a doting couple, the innkeeper tutted loudly. No one could have watched them for long with a straight face.

A few days later, Gorgon stood on the border between Euritheis and the City States, the front line of the conflict. This was a very rare occasion for a leader like him who preferred to issue strategies from the recesses of his manor. His very appearance was a testament to his desire to finish off the Jack of All Trades once and for all, especially since his men were struggling to take down the guerrilla teams trampling all over his territory.

Crush the head and the limbs will fall... Gorgon thought, setting his sights on the main battalion stationed on the border.

Since the City States were composed of numerous sovereign cities, tracking down small guerrilla teams on the move was a difficult feat. This might have been similar to the difficulties faced by detectives attempting to chase a fugitive across multiple jurisdictions.

“Don, I have returned,” announced Ajax Kong.

Gorgon listened to her report and let out a chuckle when she relayed the demand for twenty one holy coins. “Blackjack... He apparently has guts *and* a sense of humor.”

If the demand was a genuine one, it was the equivalent of anywhere from

forty million to one hundred million dollars.

“There is no need to pay such an outrageous fee, Don! I will hunt Jack down myself!”

“Easy now, Ajax. Jack is a dangerous man.” Gorgon did not want his loyal ape to fall out of a tree chasing a wounded beast, which is what he considered Jack at this point. He would have preferred to sic other animals on him, like Heaven’s Ward. Still, he continued to consider the Demon Lord’s steep price.

Catherine timidly spoke out. “But, Don... Why is he asking for holy coins? I must be too old to understand...”

“You are too humble, Catherine... You should be proud that you have remained beautiful in your ripe age.”

“D-Don...”

The rest of the room dared not draw attention to the intimate moment Gorgon and Catherine were sharing. Both Jack and Gorgon ruled their companies with an iron fist, for better or worse, which shut out all dissent. On top of that, Gorgon was too cunning to take on any advisors. What he needed was minions, loyal ones like Ajax Kong that would run into a raging fire for him. He considered free thought on the part of his subordinates to be nothing but a hindrance to his strategic genius.

On the other hand, he would have forgiven Catherine if she had stabbed him in the back. “Nothing strange about them demanding holy coins. They have some sort of deal with Holylight, so it must have to do with that.”

“Really...?!”

Gorgon had already received word that the slums of Euritheis were being sent to Holylight en masse. He saw the intentions of the Holylight government behind the Demon Lord’s demand, which wasn’t difficult to believe. There was a time in history when an entire nation strove to buy out all holy coins on the continent, driving their price to astronomical heights.

With a sober expression, Gorgon spoke of Holylight’s madness. “Zealots make an appearance throughout history. Just five hundred years ago, there were collectors of the holy coin who believed in the foolish superstitions surrounding

them, like that they would gain an audience with the Wise Angel by collecting all of them, or that holy coins were the only currency you could carry with you in the afterlife.”

“Does King intend to sell the coins to Holylight...?”

“Use them as bargaining chips, more likely.” Gorgon’s answer made those around him listen with anticipation. Everyone had been completely bewildered by King’s intentions, and Gorgon never bothered to explain these things to his minions, and he wouldn’t have done so this time if anyone other than Catherine had asked the question. This was another reason why she was a ray of hope for those of the Gorgon Company.

“Holylight outlawed slavery, but in reality... Two thousand of them are about to be sold.” To anyone not privy to what had gone on behind the scenes in Euritheis, the mass emigration came across as a large-scale slave trade. There were times in war when prisoners were taken, but not by the thousands from the middle of a city. “He must need some holy coins to make Holylight turn a blind eye. Probably under the guise of improving the lives of the poor, which is why he chose the residents of the slums. Claiming the holy coins as a mere donation.”

“H-How could anyone be so devious...?”

“There are those who will break their moral code for a few coins.”

Catherine only saw King as a kidnapper, but Gorgon was also interested in his buyer: perhaps the man who called himself the Demon Lord, the ruler of the western mines Dona Dona, or the Butterfly sisters who owned the southern mines. Holylight’s severe class divide meant that only the richest of the rich had any power to make this kind of purchase. As Holylight had little value to the City States when it came to trading, they received little information about the nation. Still, Gorgon’s brilliant deduction drew gasps of awe from his minions; they were reassured that nothing would go wrong if they followed him. Even King’s mysterious actions had been so easily explained.

Draw the holy coins out of us and scavenge slaves from Euritheis. Quite the deal you’ve made at zero cost and massive profits, isn’t it, King...? Gorgon let out a chuckle. On top of it all, King had very effectively advertised himself. Of

course, Gorgon had planned to negotiate the exact price of the job after Jack was out of the picture, but he did not expect any complications. Looking back on King's actions, he had shown consistency, making as few moves as possible to reach his goals. Negotiations would be easy with an efficient man like him.

"He's trading Jack's head for holy coins from us and a drove of slaves from Euritheis, which he will turn over to Holylight... What price did you name...? A brilliant move, King... Or whoever is behind you."

Gorgon laughed, seeing a crude three-way trade in King's actions.

Seeing Gorgon's mood improve, Ajax Kong seized the opportunity to hand him a pair of wooden boxes. She hadn't dared interrupt him until now.

"Oh? Charcoal, is it?" Gorgon said upon inspection. "How savage. But these...are well made." Charcoal, once again, was forbidden from trade. Anyone selling or buying it would find themselves behind bars in no time. "Why, when he has access to Spell Stones...?"

The long-term use of Spell Stones required spellcasters to imbue them with magic, and they deteriorated with every use and recharge. In the end, they became ordinary stones.

Charcoal... It's too risky to trade, considering the potential cost and backlash. Making charcoal was actually quite an ordeal. Wood had to be cut at even lengths, dried out in a furnace under even heat for as long as a week, with well-trained workers monitoring the fire and smoke the entire time. Charcoal made in a day or so burned less hot and did not last long. Considering the great amount of labor and financial cost that went into the process, on top of the limited lumber supply on the continent, it was inevitable that Fire Spell Stones had become preferred over the course of history.

Has any nation suffered a major loss in a war recently...? Gorgon thought of the Northern Nations, wondering if lumber had been given away as a condition of surrender. Even if it had, of course, there was no reason to turn it into charcoal.

When Gorgon opened the other box, his sleek face contorted in disbelief. "Impossible...! Blackstones were lost to history...!"

Coal was a resource that had been depleted millennia ago. In the days of old, when the mythical war between angels and demons worsened, coal had been rapidly mined to extinction, and was now considered an Ancient Fragment. The treasury of the Gorgon Company held a minuscule sample of the material, which helped Gorgon identify what sat in the box.

“Ajax Kong! What did King say when he gave you this?!” Gorgon shouted, shaking Ajax’s massive stature. Her don was more fearsome to her than any monster; he persecuted traitors without mercy and destroyed anyone who dared cross him. Naturally, anyone deemed useless by the don had a grave future ahead of them.

“Uh, um, h-h-he only said to show that to you, Don...”

“Incredible! Well done... Well done indeed, bringing this safely to me!”

“Th-Thank you, Don!”

Gorgon leapt from his chair and threw a bag full of silver coins at Ajax. For as much terror as he inspired in his minions, he was willing to go above and beyond to reward anyone who served him well. He knew exactly when to use the stick and when to use the carrot.

Now Gorgon paced back and forth, as if he had forgotten about the minions around him, who now all maintained a painstaking silence, taking this opportunity to behold their leader more excited than ever before. If anyone dared interrupt his thinking now, they would have been killed on the spot.

King... Where did he get this?! Don’t tell me a new mine’s been found in Holylight! Coal, or Blackstone, had a wide variety of uses. It had great calorific value, producing a large amount of heat for the amount consumed. It was even used to make salt in nations that neighbored the sea during the days of old, until the mines ran dry, of course. Its explosive energy was also an alluring option for weapon smithing. Dwarves, who were much more adept at wielding fire and metallurgy than humans, could generate unbounded profits from coal.

No, think of the bigger picture... With Blackstones at our disposal, humans may finally be able to make Top-Tier weapons and armor. No, we will achieve it. Gorgon, like most humans, was not happy about the current state of the world, where other races outclassed humans when it came to metalworking. The

resurrection of this long-lost resource would spell infinite possibilities for humanity. The byproduct of burning coal was also an ingredient for cement, making this an invaluable resource for the continent at every stage.

“Color me surprised. I didn’t expect a trump card like this...!” Gorgon immediately decided that coal was not from any of the Northern Nations. If a Blackstone had been found anywhere in the north, he would have caught wind of it. On the other hand, in Holylight, the country of countless mines that exported Spell Stones, there was a non-zero chance that a new Blackstone mine had been discovered.

“No, wait...!” A light bulb lit up above Gorgon’s head. He thought that he had just caught the end of this endlessly tangled string. “Maybe they need those two thousand slaves to mine Blackstone...? It all makes sense! Even if they had to keep things quiet, they could much more easily dispose of foreign slaves!” Gorgon shouted, and his minions could only listen in awe that such a nefarious scheme, one that shook even their don, was underway without their knowledge. The Demon Lord had indeed considered taking the people of the slums on as miners and construction workers to expand the village, so Gorgon’s guess was not very far off the mark. If only he knew that every turn of these events was simply a product of instinct and coincidence...

Finally, Gorgon began cackling from his heightened emotions. “It all comes back to Blackstone, doesn’t it...? No wonder you were so eager to showcase yourself to us.” He concluded that King must have been trying to secure a buyer for his supply of Blackstones. At this point, Gorgon crossed Dona Dona and the Butterfly sisters off of his mental list of possible bosses for King. Neither of them would have involved the City States with such a precious material.

Which leaves only one possibility... The man who called himself the Demon Lord, the man on the rise in the eastern wasteland of Holylight. Gorgon had considered him a simple ball of ambition, which was nothing new in history, but a man who only thinks of his own ambitions would not know what to do with Blackstones. He would have had connections to buyers. No merchant was dumb enough to buy Blackstones from someone they couldn’t trust, which would only lead to self-destruction.

We, however, are a different story. Good eye, King... Or ‘Demon Lord’? No one

would question the name of the Gorgon Company. They had solid trade routes throughout the continent, making them the best group to strike a deal with regarding something like this. The reemergence of Blackstone could have easily caused a war over the precious material, but nations throughout the continent would stay quiet if the Gorgon Company was involved.

I see... I can see how a mine was discovered in a land forsaken for thousands of years. What a lucky man this Demon Lord is. Gorgon's brain whirled with thought. No one on the continent thought to pay attention to eastern Holylight—a blind spot. *It's also the location where the Wise Angel vanished, according to legend. Perhaps it's a land full of possibilities I haven't thought of...* Gorgon had aptly scoped out much of what he did not know. The abandoned mines that would soon produce Blackstones would, indeed, appear in Eastern Holylight out of nowhere, as if they had been suddenly discovered. He was also right that some of the migrants from Euritheis would end up working there. But, he still had not figured out that King and the Demon Lord were the same person, let alone that everything he had accomplished was a product of chance.

Jack's name now left Gorgon's brain. *Neither he nor Euritheis matter anymore! Humanity will create a revolution with Blackstone! And...* Gorgon lost himself in thought for some time before issuing orders to his minions. "Hulk, take all the men you need. Eliminate the enemy immediately. King will soon arrive with a gift in hand. Our enemy must be gone before then. Do not embarrass me."

"Yes, Don! Hulk smash!"

Gorgon turned to an even larger man who somehow resembled a mountain range.

"Andre. Exterminate those guerrilla teams at all cost. Tear down the entire towns where they are hiding."

"I'll crush them all..."

Finally, Gorgon turned to Ajax Kong, who stared back with a burning gaze, anticipating her order. "Ajax, go to King and see his work through. Show him what we are capable of if you are presented with the opportunity. Do not let anyone else lay a finger on him or his Blackstones."

“As you wish, Don.”

Gorgon accepted her confident response with satisfaction. Bloodthirsty as they were, his minions were strong. Ajax, in particular, was a prodigy on the battlefield.

“Then we will begin.” Gorgon snapped his fingers and his minions scattered. They knew not to what end their don was leading them, but knew that they were not being led astray. The young leader had produced enough results to warrant their trust. His only downside, as his minions saw it, was his extreme fetish. Even now, he stood caressing Catherine’s hair as if it were woven of silver and gold.

“Don...”

“Call me by my name when we are alone, Catherine. Remember?”

They seemed happy with each other, and no one dared to stand between them. Even the Demon Lord would have avoided the sight of them if he had come across it.

Puppeteer

—The northern border of Euritheis.

The Demon Lord and Mitsuhide were strolling down the main street. Even after Ajax Kong's departure, the pair continued enjoying their vacation in Euritheis to the fullest, sightseeing by day and drinking by night. But now, having heard that Ajax Kong was on her way back, the Demon Lord finally started working his gig.

"Sir King. They are apparently cowering in a castle on the border with Milk."

"As persistent as Michael Myers..."

The Demon Lord gazed up at the clear sky, already looking exhausted. He certainly didn't enjoy the prospect of having to go out and recapture someone he had already beaten up. Even Toshimitsu looked a bit downtrodden beside Mitsuhide.

"Why don't you ride that deer?"

"I wouldn't think of it while you have no mount, Sir King..."

"Don't worry about it. I actually want to see you on that thing."

"R-Really...? Then, if I may..." Mitsuhide mounted Toshimitsu with a flourish.

She wore a set of Japanese armor down to her forearms and shins, which added quite some weight to her, but Toshimitsu's step did not falter. A historical set of Japanese armor weighed anywhere from forty to sixty pounds, not including the weight of the weapon and the rider itself.

Let's see what he can do... As if to test out Toshimitsu's capabilities, the Demon Lord sped up, stopped out of nowhere, made harsh turns... But Toshimitsu showed no sign of faltering and remained surprisingly nimble. Toshimitsu's species just might have been the best riding beast of Jipang.

Whoa! I wonder what his Dexterity is like when he goes top speed... The Demon Lord couldn't help but imagine Toshimitsu charging at an enemy and

penetrating their armor with his vicious antlers.

“I’ve seen him drink, but I’ve barely seen him eat his feed,” the Demon Lord said.

“He doesn’t like much foreign feed.”

“I suppose he’s an herbivore... Let’s give this a try.” The Demon Lord produced a carrot from his Item Folder.

Kyon and Momo had given him piles of the stuff when he left the village. He had been told that they were extremely valuable on this continent, but he still considered them an ordinary vegetable that could be bought from any old supermarket.

“If that isn’t a carrot!”

“Not like *I*’ll eat it raw. Let’s see if he will.” As soon as the Demon Lord held the carrot up to Toshimitsu’s face, he chomped down on the vegetable, gobbling it up leaf and all. “Oh? I always imagined deer surviving on those crackers they give tourists in Nara, but you *do* eat vegetables... Down to their stems,” the Demon Lord remarked, impressed by the normal behavior of the deer, which he knew nothing about.

Deer, in fact, preferred to eat leaves and acorns, and particularly enjoyed vegetables like carrots and cabbage.

“All right, let’s give him another one.”

Toshimitsu chomped down another with a joyful sound that resembled something between a hum and a bleat.

“Such a precious commodity... You are the most generous ruler that has ever lived!”

“Stop making such a big deal out of it...” To the Demon Lord, a carrot was still just a carrot. He continued to feed Toshimitsu without reservation, and the deer’s mood improved with every carrot. He even began licking the Demon Lord’s fingers and lifting his snout to his face. The Demon Lord responded by gently petting Toshimitsu’s head and neck. “Your fur is softer than I thought it would be. Silky... What do you say? Why don’t you leave the drunk samurai in

the dust and make me your new master?”

“S-Sir King! And don’t you think about it, Toshimitsu!”

The party’s banter stopped when they reached the border. As soon as they noticed the stench of blood in the air, the scattered bodies came into view.

“What a horrible way to go...” Mitsuhide said.

“They’re from the capital.”

They were all members of the Jack of All Trades, terribly disfigured and impaled on dozens of large pikes. There was even a group of them skewered together and burnt to a crisp.

“They were killed by a Milk tribe from the north of Euri. They must have called for aid as a last resort... But ended up luring in the wolves.”

While Mitsuhide coolly analyzed the scene, the Demon Lord remembered how Mikan had warned him about them.

“I don’t think we’ll be sharing drinks with anyone...” the Demon Lord said, lighting his cigarette and taking a better look around.

From every tree hung a body, painting a horrific scene. It was clear to see that the tribe who massacred these people was barbaric, not recognizing their enemies as human.

“Sir King, at this rate, Jack may already be dead.”

“This complicates things...”

At this point, Ajax Kong’s travel party caught up to the pair. While the rest of her comrades were on horses, she rode in on an enormous gorilla with pitch-black fur, making for quite a sight.

Their travel party all scowled at the horrific aftermath of the massacre before them, save for Ajax, who immediately identified the culprits. “The Tungyas. Jack’s fallen far.” She had plenty of experience dealing with the Milk tribes, as she often guarded Gorgon’s caravans that traveled through their territory. Her glare shifted to the Demon Lord. “Hey, King. I’ll go take out Jack myself if you’re too scared.”

The one I'm scared of is you! Why's a gorilla riding a gorilla?! Instead of voicing his reaction, the Demon Lord inhaled a puff of smoke and managed to calm himself. He had to push forward to get his hands on those holy coins.

"Let's get going... If we must."

The Demon Lord turned his eyes from the gorilla rider and started towards the castle-like architecture on the horizon. Mitsuhide and Ajax Kong followed, each riding their bizarre creatures and jousting each other with their glares.

"Looking as stupid as always. What hick did you come out of, little girl?"

"You're the one who looks stupid. Brainless fighters like you would be the first to be taken down in Jipang. Are you sure the ape shouldn't be riding you?"

"You think you can cut through me with that flimsy little stick of yours?"

"You underestimate the *katana*? You must know very little of this world."

The women continued taunting each other, eager for any opening to prove themselves superior.

Of course, the Demon Lord was already sick of it. *Duke it out in a ring, why don't you?!*

With a perilous atmosphere about them, the party arrived at the castle that defended the border. As expected, more bodies on pikes adorned the ground before the castle walls, mounds of corpses haplessly piled around them.

Ajax scoffed dauntlessly, and Mitsuhide quietly drew her matchlock rifle. Flags flew above the walls, but they belonged to Milk, not Euritheis.

"Wait here," the Demon Lord simply said and strode towards the open gate. He wanted to avoid causing any unnecessary trouble by towing in the bloodthirsty pair behind him.

A siege... Mine wasn't so gruesome. The Demon Lord gazed up at the flags. The sight of bodies strewn all over the place was one of the lowest forms of devastation. "Whoever did this has no taste in annihilation..." the Demon Lord muttered.

At the same moment, a man emerged on top of the wall. He was dressed lightly, but wore a distinctive hat and a giant bow on his back. He stared down

with an icy look, his cruelty evident in his expression.

I've seen someone with that look before... That's right. The Mongols that invaded Japan. The man resembled a mongol warrior the Demon Lord had read about in a textbook, and indeed, he looked nomadic. He belonged to the Tungya tribe, one of the most cruel and barbaric tribes, even by Milk standards.

He noted the Demon Lord's peculiar suit and spoke lazily, "Those constricting clothes... You're from the City States. What do you want?"

"I heard that I could find Jack here."

"We captured him, Suit. Bring food and coin if you want him. Stack the coin of the City States until it reaches me," the man cackled. With no intent to negotiate, he loosed an arrow in one fluid motion, which struck inches from the Demon Lord's feet. "Suits are always counting their money. Go grovel to your boss," he spat with audible hatred. Perhaps the tribesman of Milk who lived with nature could never get along with men in suits.

The Demon Lord sighed and labored to respond. "I would prefer to settle this peacefully."

"Here's a tip, Suit. We take what we want by force, unlike you coin-counting weaklings. Maybe I'll cut off that snobby tongue of yours." He laughed, tugging at his necklace to reveal it. It was a simple chain at first glance, but each link pierced several tongues, making for a very revolting accessory. "We sever the tongues of the ones that begged for their lives to deter us from cowardice. Your words won't protect you. Shut up and stack those coins, pathetic Suit."

"It wouldn't be a fun time...if your tribe decides to visit the village of Rabbi." The Demon Lord flicked the cigarette from his fingers, and it struck the man right between his eyes.

"Agh! You want your eyes shot out?!" He drew his bow, aiming for the Demon Lord's face.

The next instant, the man's head exploded from Sodom's Fire, thrown faster than the eye could follow and faster than the man could recognize his imminent death. His headless body remained standing for a moment... Until it fell like timber, causing a commotion on the castle walls.

“Wh-What was that?!”

“An attack! Enemies out front!”

“Huh? We killed all those bastards from Euri...”

Soldiers flocked to the wall as Mitsuhide caught up to the Demon Lord, looking elated for some reason. “Sir King! Allow me to lead the charge into...” Mitsuhide’s excitement shriveled as she noticed how the Demon Lord had changed, his eyes now terribly cold. Mitsuhide knew the look: the Demon Lord saw his enemies on the wall as nothing but a number.

“You said you want to serve me, Mitsuhide, but I only keep eight advisors.”

“Y-Yes, Sir King...”

“Much to my surprise, though, Ren has taken a liking to you. I would consider you Ren’s attendant... Or squire.” The Demon Lord jerked his chin at the swarm of soldiers atop the wall. His instruction was clear. “If you really want to serve that girl, show me you have what it takes.”

“Yes, Sir...!” Mitsuhide whipped her bow out and nocked an arrow, pouring into it an incredible power: magic, which they called *hojutsu* in Jipang.

“*Namu-hachiman-daibosatsu...*” **Kagutsuchi.**

A flaming arrow flew into the sky where it swelled into a giant ball of fire. The ball exploded with violent sparks, showering the castle with crimson rain.

“F-Fire! It’s raining fire!”

“Hey! Someone grab some wat— Aghh!”

“Dammit, what’s with this?! Water can’t put it out!”

Burning the men, the castle walls, and even steel, the crimson rain seeped into the entirety of the fortress. It seemed to burn flesh and bone with delight and without prejudice.

Mitsuhide stormed in through the open gate alone. Within, all was in chaos, with people trying to either extinguish the fire or simply run from it. The fire could not be extinguished, however. Mitsuhide’s flames were of a peculiar element that refused to die out under water or earth.

The castle was soon enveloped in black smoke, as if a thousand flaming arrows had been lobbed into the grounds at once.

“Behold with all your might! I am Akechi Jyube Mitsuhide!” she exclaimed and swung her sword from atop Toshimitsu. Anyone who stood in her way was pierced by Toshimitsu’s antlers, and anyone who tried to dodge was decapitated by Mitsuhide’s blade.

Feeling the rush of battle, Toshimitsu sprinted at breakneck speed, stabbing any warrior in range and tossing them into the air.

Even the infamously savage Tungyas had never experienced a battle like this; they were being torn to shreds.

Watching the soldiers scatter to the wind, Mitsuhide cackled. “Is there not one *real* man among you?!”

As she called, Toshimitsu’s antlers emitted a bright light before he swung his head through the air.

Kamaitachi.

The equivalent of a class-four Wind spell stormed from him, tearing the remaining soldiers to shreds.

“Who’s next?!” Mitsuhide cried, firing another Kagutsuchi at the warehouses within the castle grounds.

The Demon Lord could only chuckle at her grand assault. *Well, well... True to history, she’s good at setting places on fire.* The Demon Lord, too, had set the four corners of the continent ablaze, so he had no room to talk.

At last, a general emerged from the recesses of the castle with a battalion in tow, ready to put an end to the attack. Unlike his men, the general wore heavy steel armor and exuded the air of a seasoned fighter.

“One little girl...? Shame on you, men,” the general spat and drew his heavy saber.

The cowering soldiers had their morale restored by the sight of their general and began cheering at once.

“The guerrilla general! He came!”

“Ha! The little bitch is done for!”

Seeing the general part a way through his men, Mitsuhide dismounted. Their face-off might have resembled that between a Mongolian invader and a samurai.

“I’ll tear off your head and stuff in pig shit.”

“Even your declarations are uncivilized.” Mitsuhide smirked, holding her sword low.

The guerrilla general screeched like a monstrous bird and charged, swinging his saber down. As they clashed, Mitsuhide parried the saber with ease. Her sword flashed.

*“Kurika-rago, **Kamui!**”*



The man's silhouette split in two. Mitsuhide's blade sliced through him from his metal helm to his anus. With their leader literally slashed in half, his men began fleeing without another word. Their only alternative was death.

Having watched the battle until this point, Ajax Kong stepped up to the Demon Lord's side.

"That's one savage knight you got, King. That girl wants *blood*."

And you don't?!

Ajax looked as if she was the ruler of the jungle, riding an enormous gorilla. Oblivious to the Demon Lord's thoughts, Ajax curled her lips. "She's got a pretty face, but she's the same as me on the inside."

"The same?"

"She'll take killing and the smell of blood over just about anything." Ajax Kong dauntlessly walked into the castle grounds.

As if to take her place, Mitsuhide returned, elated. "S-Sir King! What did you think of my fighting?!"

"Impressive..."

"D-Does that mean I've passed your test?!"

The Demon Lord chuckled for a moment at her puppy-dog eyes, but simply nodded. He had no reason to turn her down after what he had seen.

Besides, Ren being the way she is, she's never had any friends except Akane... That might have been a greater reason than the Demon Lord was willing to admit. Although he maintained a professional facade in Ren's presence, he was concerned for her happiness. At the end of the day, the Demon Lord was as high maintenance as Mitsuhide.

The pair strolled into the castle, passing the gate where Ajax and her crew had already dominated. They continued towards the main hall where the beastly wrestler was facing off against someone who looked like the tribe leader holding a well-used spear.

The Demon Lord watched with interest. *How is she going to fight? She can't*

use WWE moves on the battlefield...

The tribe leader cockily grinned at the bare-knuckled Ajax and thrust his spear at her, but much too slowly. Ajax dove into range with a speed incongruent with her massive size, lifting the tribe leader up before slamming him down in a brainbuster.

The impact created an incredible sound and tremor, burying the leader's upper half into the ground. His protruding legs were just as horrifying as the bodies on pikes.

She did! the Demon Lord couldn't help but think. *What is this, a scene out of The Inugami Clan?*

The Tungyas were frozen at the unexpected turn of events while Ajax Kong became unstoppable. "Bring it in!" she bellowed.

"A-Aye aye!"

Ten burly men hauled in what resembled a giant metal can. Ajax grabbed the thing with one hand and slammed it into a Tungya man that had been dumbfoundingly still; his head exploded before his torso followed the same fate, as if he had taken a tank missile at close range. The 5-Gallon Can was a super heavyweight weapon that annihilated its victims like a truck. At the very least, it wasn't a weapon that anyone classified as human could easily swing around. With her favorite weapon in hand, Ajax burst into booming laughter. She swung the can without much thought, tearing off the torso of another man standing in its trajectory. She charged into the group of tribesmen, whirling the can around in every direction. No one dared approach the walking tornado as body parts piled higher by the second.

Even the Demon Lord was starting to lose color in his face. "What the...? That wouldn't even fly in Japanese pro wrestling!"

"The only way to eliminate a thing like that is by gunfire," Mitsuhide remarked.

"I picture it laughing off a hundred bullets..."

"Or maybe keep my distance and use a spear."

The Tungya seemed to reach the same conclusion and surrounded Ajax, their spears poised at her. She put her hand to her lips before spewing fire from her mouth like a flamethrower. The twenty or so men in range were engulfed in flames.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa! It *breathed fire*! It’s like I’m watching *Godzilla*!”

“Hmm... I hadn’t thought of that! Such tactical brilliance!”

“Tactical brilliance?! That thing’s a straight-up kaiju!”

While the two spectators chattered on, the Tungya finally went for a counterstrike: a mountainous man stood before Ajax Kong, raising an ax large enough to decapitate a bull. “I’ll crack your head open and put you in your place, you monster!”

“Give me your best shot... **Diamond Body.**”

The ax was swung straight for Ajax’s head, and as soon as it struck her forehead, it shattered into pieces. The man stood there, mouth agape with only the fragment of an ax handle in his hand. Ajax swung her oak-like arm to perform a lariat. With a beastly roar, she tore through the man, sending his head flying across the room and turning his torso into a geyser of blood, painting Ajax red from head to toe.

“You didn’t think you could really kill me with that little toy, did you?”

She was turning everywhere she went into a blood-soaked deathmatch ring.

The Demon Lord watched slack-jawed, while Mitsuhide cried out in amazement. “An excellent **Diamond Body**! What a spectacular display of bushido!”

“It has to be a terminator...” the Demon Lord responded.

Bodies continued to pile high every direction Ajax turned, whittling down the remaining soldiers of the tribe. With their general already slain by Mitsuhide, the Tungyas soon tossed their weapons aside and surrendered.

Ajax saw this and turned back to the Demon Lord, her face glistening with blood like she was a messenger from hell. “Surrender, huh? What’s your call, King? Bury them alive? Saw them in half? Boil them?”

“None of the above, I must say...”

“You’re a quartering guy, huh? Turns out you’re a man of taste.”

Why’s that the only other option?! Leave me out of this! The Demon Lord was speechless as a pair of men were drawn out from within the castle, bound in chains. They were Clubs and Diamonds, two of the Four Suits of the Jack of All Trades, each with a knife against their throat.

“Drop your weapons or they’ll get it!”

“Don’t move a muscle if you want the higher-ups alive!”

The Tungyas determined that the Demon Lord was also after the other members of the company. They would have been right if they had been dealing with anyone else, but anyone from the Jack of All Trades was an enemy of the Demon Lord. Ajax and Mitsuhide turned to him for confirmation, and he simply jerked his chin. Mitsuhide raised her matchlock while Ajax swung her can.

The men holding the hostages cried out in panic.

“D-Don’t you get it?! These are from the Jack—”

“S-Stop! Don’t throw that thing—”

Mitsuhide had fired through both hostage and captor, and Ajax turned the other pair into ground meat.

The Demon Lord lit a cigarette. “I thought you were striving *against* cowardice. You massacre others, but didn’t expect the same fate for yourselves?”

The Tungyas scattered in all directions, screaming for their lives, pursued by Ajax’s gang.

The Demon Lord, however, seemed to have lost all interest in them. “Let’s go see our dear friend Jack...”

They entered the throne room to find the severely injured Jack sitting on the throne, barely conscious. He didn’t seem to have noticed the intrusion at all.

“Don’t tell me he’s dead...” the Demon Lord muttered as a man emerged from behind the throne. He stood on guard, recognizing the man’s attire: it

resembled the Satanist's garb.

"Nice to meet you, Appropriator of the Black Wings..." said Utopia, the high-rank devil that led the Satanists. On the surface, he presented an elegance becoming of a great noble.

"Satanists, you were called? You've traveled far."

"Indeed. I am Utopia, leader of the Satanists. Pleasure to make your acquaintance," he greeted the Demon Lord with a wave of his hand.

Mitsuhide and Ajax readied their weapons, only for the Demon Lord to stop them. He had a question for Utopia. "Leader, huh...? What did you guys want, anyway?"

"Chaos and destruction upon the world..."

"What?" The Demon Lord frowned at the familiar phrase. The ring he had been given by the Still Angel had wanted the same thing.

Utopia laughed, apparently privy to that information. "Funny enough, we and the vile Still Angel shared a common goal. How ironic that an angel and a devil were a perfect match."

"It's worse than a dime-store paperback. Whatever else you have, you definitely don't have a sense of humor."

"Where's *your* sense of discovery? A go with me would be a change of pace from the likes of Kale and Allit. I have been called the Puppet Master, and I'm quite proud of my craft." Utopia snapped his fingers and a grand magic circle emerged on the floor, emitting a purple glow. "You won't stand in my way this time, Appropriator..." He grabbed Jack by his hair and disappeared into the mirror by the throne.

An eerie tremor prevented the Demon Lord from pursuing, and a sinister monster was summoned into the magic circle: a Hellknight, a high-ranking Hellion of the same species as the one that served Count Impaler, who caused great turmoil for the ape-hybrids. Utopia, however, had made its summoning look easy.

Mitsuhide held her sword on guard, while Ajax tutted.

“This is no easy foe, Sir King...!”

“That’s an annoying spell. King! There’s more of them coming!”

As Ajax correctly assessed, the magic circle denoted the Wave Summon spell that conjured numerous monsters in waves, almost like a small-scale Invasion.

The Demon Lord simply groaned. “I don’t have time for this...” As he finished his sentence, the Hellknight swung its giant scythe at the Demon Lord, which was promptly halted by his Assault Queller. “Just to be clear, you have no right to stand before me... Don’t cheat.”

The comment might have sounded strange to Mitsuhide and Ajax. It was an unbroken rule in the Game that only heroes who capped their levels, not to mention in a situation where doing so was only a disadvantage, earned the right to face the final boss. He held a firm belief that only the best heroes could fight toe-to-toe against the Demon Lord. He also demanded, as an artist demanded perfection, that heroes devote training, preparation, utmost precision, and their nerves to face him. It was demanding, but he considered it fair to expect that much from the player who would defeat the final boss and change the world.

With frustration, he kicked the Hellknight in its side. “You useless dolt... No player was as pathetic as you!” He spat and threw Sodom’s Fire, blowing the Hellknight to pieces. Mitsuhide and Ajax watched, speechless, as the Demon Lord continued. “I’m going to bring this whole place down. Get out.”

“Huh?” the two said in unison.

The Demon Lord tossed them out of the throne room and threw a Sodom’s Fire into the ground. “I don’t have time for this nonsense... Begone.

Supersonic.”

The powerful Third Skill shot out from Sodom’s Fire, blinding sparks shooting across the floor, walls, and ceiling of the throne room. Thunder boomed and the magic circle crumbled along with the floor, soon followed by the ceiling that came crashing onto it. “Best to destroy annoying objects.” The Demon Lord walked out of the castle as if nothing had happened.

Mitsuhide and Ajax followed him like they were sleepwalking, still unsure of what exactly had happened.

When the Demon Lord reached the courtyard and lit a cigarette, the castle began crumbling with a deafening rumble. He had overwritten Utopia's catastrophe with an even larger one. Brute force at its finest.

After watching the castle fall, Ajax bellowed in laughter. "Not bad, King! Blowing up the entire castle, magic circle and all! We've gotta share a drink sometime!" She slapped the Demon Lord on the back, pegging him as a kindred spirit.

"What an amazing feeling to make a castle fall, Sir King! Let us celebrate!" Mitsuhide jubilantly fanned herself.

Neither of them seemed to care for the mounds of bodies scattered around them. *Drinking with a fire-breathing kaiju and an annoying drunk... What did I do to deserve this?* Toshimitsu and the literal gorilla joined the fray, apparently craving alcohol as much as their masters.

"What is this, the circus?!"

Despite Utopia's intrusion, the Demon Lord's havoc-wreaking would leave the Northern Nations for a time, moving to the City States that ruled the economy of the continent.

Newbie

Race: Human — Age: 20

Level: 3 — Stats: Unknown

Skills:

Premonition

A sixth sense that vaguely senses danger. When its Skill Level increases, it evolves into Prognostication.

Yellow Alert

A subtle alarm that notifies the user of a dangerous person. With practice, the alert can also turn red. Only activates if the user considers the target dangerous.

Death's Eye

A sensory grasp on death of all kinds. Eventually, the user will hallucinate death's scythe where it will soon fall.

A new recruit still developing his skills. He may get carried away at times, but he is honest and good-natured at heart, which are forms of treasure in and of themselves. In the near future, he may overcome various obstacles.

The Summit

——Headquarters of the Gorgon Company, the City States.

A few days later, the prolonged debacle would finally come to an end. The man who had been keeping a close eye on King throughout the turmoil would finally take center stage.

“Is that so...? Jack has been taken by the Satanists... Well, a Hellion,” Gorgon remarked of Ajax Kong’s report in his extravagant office. As his chin rested on his knuckles, his expression betrayed a hint of sorrow for the end of his nemesis. “How ironic that the same demonic arts that allured him so would bring about his end.” Gorgon, through his meticulous web of reconnaissance, discerned that Jack was partially Hellion, and also that a Hellion led the Satanists. This was enough evidence to consider the whole affair concluded. Abducted by a Hellion and now without his hounds, Jack was of no concern to him. “In any case, I don’t expect to see the day when he regains his rule of Euritheis.” Gorgon’s mind was already onto more important thoughts: neither Jack nor Euritheis mattered to him. His mind was fixated on Blackstones. “Is King on his way here?”

“Yes, Don! I was told to notify you as such.”

“You’ve outdone yourself... Rilla, give Ajax her reward.”

Rilla was a walking pile of muscles that nearly burst out of his butler’s uniform. He was older than fifty, yet appeared to be in his physical prime.

Shortly, Rilla brought in a box full of jewels. Ajax could sell them for the lower end of their market value and still build a lavish mansion for herself. These glimmering treats Gorgon used to reward good work were one of the reasons Gorgon’s henchmen pledged their unyielding loyalty to him.

Even Ajax Kong shook at the box of blinding gems. “D-Don... I haven’t earned such a reward...”

“You have. I hear you put on a mighty display for him. I appreciate your

dauntless devotion and destructive violence.”

“Th-This is such an honor, Don!” Ajax bowed and shrank away from the office.

She had, indeed, put on such a display that the Demon Lord was completely appalled by her brutality.

Watching the enormous Ajax leave, Rilla discreetly advised Gorgon. “Don. Have you any thoughts of marriage?”

“Marriage?” Gorgon scoffed. “I have Catherine.”

Rilla, who had served Gorgon’s family for ages, still showed concern. Regardless of Gorgon’s feelings for her, Catherine was no longer of childbearing age. “She would not be able to bear you an heir.”

“What if she can’t? My love will not falter one bit over such a trivial matter.”

“Ajax may be a bit brutish... But she could provide strong children.”

“I’m sure she’ll become a beautiful woman... In forty years or so.”

Rilla suppressed a grunt at Gorgon’s stubborn response.

In Gorgon’s defense, he did have good reason for his preference. The tradition of selecting the most capable of his clan as their next leader had ruined his life. He lived in constant fear of his siblings and cousins or their supporters assassinating him, which took a toll on his mental state. He had not spent a moment, not even when he was sleeping or bathing, without his guard up. Naturally, his meals were poisoned on a daily basis. Those he considered closest to him had been bought out and thus betrayed him countless times. Through his grueling youth and young adulthood, Catherine was the woman who had always remained by his side and protected him. His trust for Catherine had evolved into love then adoration. Gorgon betrayed his clan not to protect himself, but to protect Catherine... In a historic massacre of everyone related to him.

Rilla, who was privy to Gorgon’s upbringing, had mixed feelings about the matter. He didn’t want to force Gorgon’s hand, but the serious problem that his don was heirless remained. Gorgon’s death was the death of his bloodline.

“Please take a look at these, at least, Don.”

“More portraits of potential brides...? Rilla, you are my oldest advisor next to Catherine, but I haven’t given you the authority to undermine my decisions.”

“The proud bloodline of Gorgon cannot end with you, Don. Please consider it,” Rilla pleaded.

Gorgon relented and took the portraits, each portraying a beautiful young woman of sixteen to twenty-five from noble houses. “Rilla... What am I to do with these *infants*?”

“I-Infants, Don? They are all young and healthy—”

“I have no fetish for children. How many times must I tell you that a woman’s beauty only shines after sixty years of life? Such plain truth escapes your mind...” Gorgon chuckled the portraits, as if their mere existence would soil his hands.

Many young men and women who approached him had been assassins. Now Gorgon felt physical aversion towards those younger than a certain age. Rilla packed away the portraits, letting out a sigh.

Gorgon would have to wait for his encounter with Yu to be cured of his fixation.

The infamously incendiary Demon Lord was finally arriving in the City States. The genius strategist Gorgon was about to meet his match in this unparalleled con man.

——The day of the summit.

The Demon Lord and Gorgon faced one another in the extravagant guesthouse. Mitsuhide stood smugly behind the Demon Lord while Catherine busily lined the meeting table with plates and tea cups. This high-class table was adorned with extravagant dishes, fruit, and wine of every variety. All ceremonious, of course, as both parties seemed too preoccupied to enjoy any of these offerings.

So this is King... Gorgon silenced a grunt as he faced the man seated comfortably in the sofa across from him, who greeted him with an overpowering glare. Jack was a crazed man in his own right, but the man before

him was on another level. In addition, his every gesture was as refined as those of a delegate from a global superpower. *He exudes an air of violence...that melds perfectly with his elegance.* Gorgon had met people from many walks of life, but none of them had been so bizarre. He didn't quite feel comfortable in the presence of this man, who seemed far too important to be the mere gang leader of mercenaries. "A pleasure to finally meet you," Gorgon initiated.

The Demon Lord only sipped from his cup. The gesture alone managed to plant an inexplicable sense of defeat in Gorgon. He had been made to make a greeting first, while the Demon Lord still remained silent, leisurely drinking in a display of dominance. *He is overconfident... No, I suppose he's under the orders of whoever is behind him. The one with the supply of Blackstones.*

Many had attempted to show themselves of a higher standing in their negotiations with Gorgon in the past, but he always managed to make them pay for their empty threats. With his powerful company backing his each and every word, many who negotiated with him dug their own grave through their careless words.

"First, King, I would like to—"

"I need to clear this up... I don't know this 'King' you speak of. Never even seen him."

"Is that supposed to be a joke...? Not a very effective one."

"No idea who or what 'Heaven's Ward' is either." The Demon Lord produced a cigarette from his pocket, and Mitsuhide lit it for him. He had finally had enough of this embarrassing case of mistaken identity.

Gorgon, on the other hand, was nonplussed. He couldn't tell if the Demon Lord spoke out of jest, with some hidden intention, or even due to a drug-induced delirium.

"Pardon my asking, King. Are you on Trance?"

Some mercenaries, in an attempt to smother their fear during battle or in the post-combat excitement, used Trance regularly. There were even others that used it as a painkiller. With the correct dosage and application, the drug could be used medicinally.

The Demon Lord rejected the notion. “I only spoke the truth, since all of you are apparently suffering a great misunderstanding.”

“Well... I’m not sure where to start, now,” Gorgon said, his cruel gaze shielded behind his glasses.

The problem with junkies and drunks was that they considered themselves sober.

“For the record, I detest the stuff. Those drugs can ruin a society.”

“A sense of morality rarely found in mercenaries. Should I offer you a round of applause?” Frustration boiling beneath his proverbial mask, Gorgon considered what King was aiming for. Was he going to keep up this small talk until he forced Gorgon to mention the Blackstone? Was he actually drugged up? Despite knowing that starting the discussion would give him a disadvantage off the bat, Gorgon relented. “Very well. Let me be frank. Your employer wishes to sell their Blackstones to us, don’t they?”

“Hm...”

“You extracted the slums from Euri to make its people miners, and your boss needs Holy Coins to pay for blind eyes. Holylight is still infatuated with the Holy Coin.”

“Oh...”

“As a token of thanks for getting rid of pesky ol’ Jack, I’ll pay you the Holy Coins you asked for. That’s one objective off of your checklist. A pretty return for your employer, who hasn’t invited any risks so far.”

“I see...” the Demon Lord acknowledged with gravitas, as if he was carefully considering Gorgon’s every word, both looking for an opening in Gorgon’s response and for sheer entertainment. His disposition was highly disrespectful, at best.

“So, King? How many Holy Coins does your employer—”

“Before I answer that, what if I told you that I am my own employer?”

“Huh?” Gorgon froze. His face indicated his increasingly dire suspicion that the Demon Lord *was* hopped-up on Trance. In the first place, Gorgon regarded

the main topic of their conversation to be Blackstones. He considered the matter with the Holy Coins a done deal: he was offering to pay, so the only remaining question was how many. He was too eager to end this discussion and move onto the much greater topic: the price, quantity, transport method, and more about the Blackstones.

His emotions getting the better of him, Gorgon finally said, “My apologies, King. I wish to speak to your superior directly.”

“I am my own superior.”

“Will you just—” Gorgon halted. As ridiculous as it sounded, the thought crossed his mind that the Demon Lord might be telling the truth. “*You’re the man who calls himself the Demon Lord in Holylight?*”

“That’s what I’ve been saying.”

“I don’t understand. Then why would you go around calling yourself King— Oh!” Gorgon blurted out as a light bulb flickered above his head. The Demon Lord’s straightforward description of facts was distorted by Gorgon’s brilliance into an elaborately inaccurate conclusion. *If he is the Demon Lord I’ve heard about, he would disguise himself as King because...* Gorgon’s first thought was that he wanted to deflect blame. The Jack of All Trades was dismantled, but there were plenty of surviving members scattered all over the land, including the guerrilla fighters still active in the City States. Gorgon soon abandoned this idea, refusing to believe that the Demon Lord would fear a few scattered Jack of All Trades members.

No...! He didn’t pretend to be King! When Gorgon reached a new conclusion, cold sweat trickled down his back. He felt a knot in his stomach as he saw how his preconception had blinded him to more possibilities. With a hand on his forehead, Gorgon glared at the ceiling. “You were after Euritheis itself. It’s rather roundabout, but allows the throne to come to you.”

The Demon Lord returned a faint smile. The evil grin was enough to convince Gorgon that his conclusion was accurate, although the Demon Lord had decided to just smile at the nonsense Gorgon was going on about.

“It wasn’t a disguise... You created anew the hero the people wanted. No wonder you claim to have never seen him,” Gorgon continued.

The Demon Lord's eyes wandered behind a cloud of smoke, his head sufficiently gummed up. *What is he going on about?! I'm starting to think he's the druggie!*

Meanwhile, Gorgon chuckled in amusement. The brilliant strategist went on to eloquently describe what was to come. "As you intended, Jack's disappearance will cause confusion in and out of Euri, making it very likely to be invaded. The people are drunk with a sense of freedom for now, but they will soon realize their reality." Gorgon was right. With Jack and his iron fist gone, Euritheis's economic and military presence would crumble. There was no strength or influence left in the king who had been held under Jack's thumb for so long. The people no longer looked up to him. "The hero who defeated Jack the Unreachable. Who would the people ask for help when they snapped back to reality? Even the king would want their hero to return."

"Hm..."

"It would be a bit awkward if their hero was the Demon Lord causing havoc in Holylight. The people and the king would only see him as another Jack, and reject him outright. All you had to do...was create a hero."

"I see..." The Demon Lord nodded along, secretly impressed. He had intended to unfurl the complicated misunderstanding to put an end to them calling him King, but Gorgon was describing a stunningly cunning man. The Demon Lord took a mental note to use this explanation when Tahara next needed one. Like a certain animal in lion's skin, the Demon Lord resolved to reuse and abuse the wisdom of others for his own benefit. Truly the undisputed king of douchebaggery.

"You even took out a portion of the castle on the border? Very thorough of you," Gorgon chuckled.

It was practically an open invitation for Milk to invade, and Gorgon's prediction was accurate; Milk would not pass up such a golden opportunity.

"Jack blew and blew until he was red in the face, but all you had to do was turn up the heat and wait."

"Hm..."

“‘King of Heaven’s Ward.’ Another brilliant move. A higher-up in the rising star of the mercenary world... Both Jack and I were played like a pair of fiddles.”

“Well...” The Demon Lord feigned humility as he tried to memorize Gorgon’s analysis. He didn’t comprehend most of what Gorgon was saying, but he figured it would be useful somehow.

With a dramatic shrug, the Demon Lord put on a tone of reluctance. “Your strategic genius surpasses your reputation. The brilliant Don of the City States...”

“It only sounds sardonic when you’ve outplayed me.”

That was nowhere near the Demon Lord’s intention, but he gave a reserved acknowledgment as if to commend Gorgon on his insight. On the inside, he was smirking at this newfound inspiration.

Gorgon, too, looked satisfied for having read his opponent like a book. “I hear the minister is even overseeing the transportation of the residents of the slums.”

“News travels fast to you, Don.”

Gorgon was reassured that the Demon Lord had calculated everything before coming to Euri. He had even taken complete control of the government already. While Gorgon silently commended the Demon Lord for the assuredness of his planning, anyone, even a child, could form a plan on paper. Gorgon was shaken that the Demon Lord had executed his plan through to the end without a hitch. Not everyone could do that. Especially when the Demon Lord had attacked the king of Euri, its people, the Jack of All Trades, and the Gorgon Company all in one move. Before anyone knew, he had manipulated all forces to do as he wanted.

Euri’s borders will soon cave, destroying the people’s lives... In these times of war, a weakened nation would not go unpicked for long. Their farms would be pillaged, their goods looted, women ravished, and men enslaved. Having been jerked awake from the dream of their liberation, the people would welcome the illusory hero they had created with thunderous applause.

In history, what most often followed the dethroning of a powerful tyrant was

confusion, rather than liberation. In recent years, the death of Saddam Hussein was followed by a brief era of celebration, but the chaos that came after still wracked the Middle East in the present day.

What a monster... No wonder he calls himself the Demon Lord. Gorgon was sure that the Demon Lord taking over Holylight was a matter of when, not if. This fearsome man would snatch up everything the nation had to offer: foolish nobles controlling the wealth and their figurehead Holy Maidens. Gorgon also surmised that the foundation of the Demon Lord's undertaking was the Holy Coins. Someone like Gorgon preferred stability over chaos: easier to do business that way.

He considered forking over a considerable number of Holy Coins. "Then, King... No, Demon Lord. Let us discuss those Holy Coins, then the Blackstones."

"I request twenty-one Holy Coins." The Demon Lord silently groaned. With what lay ahead, he suspected the price of Holy Coins would skyrocket. The overthrowing of Euritheis's leader made the price less than outrageous, but Gorgon knew the Demon Lord had the rule of Euritheis in his sight, which made Jack's death worthless.

The Demon Lord, however, had a shocking offer. "In exchange... I'll lock you in for ten gold medallions for each ton of coal for the next year."

"What?! How can you afford to— P-Pardon me."

The Demon Lord had reaffirmed that coal was worth a great deal in this world. For starters, the Demon Lord planned to staff the Abandoned Mines with five hundred workers at the start. He estimated the maximum yield was about two kilograms per worker per day. There had once been a unique player party by the name of The Gunkanjima Fan Club, and even they could only yield 10 kilos a day. That meant the Demon Lord's total daily yield would equate to about a ton. That wasn't much in comparison to Gunkanjima in Japan, which had produced upwards of 2,000 tons in its prime.

Even so, the offer seemed like a joke to Gorgon, who would get his hands on a pile of lost treasure for a mere ten gold medallions.

The Demon Lord, too, had rapidly calculated that number to avoid losing money on the venture. *It's tough work in the mines... Least I can do is pay them*

well... Even if he paid each worker two silver coins a day, he would be left with a healthy profit. A day of running the mines would net him about ten thousand dollars a day.

Of course, the resources the Abandoned Mines produced would never run dry... Which was only natural for an area intended to be a fuel stop for the players.

The Demon Lord also expected the workers to become accustomed to their work after a year. *It's like I'm running a job center, but it's something to look forward to...* The Demon Lord considered the workforce in modern-day Japan. Since there were no systems of accreditation in this world, workers needed raw experience; this was a great job to train his workers in, since the workers could use the skills they acquired in both the Quarry and the Mine. He longed for experts that could dig him up all sorts of resources and act as professional transporters.

Meanwhile, Gorgon trembled, nearly overcome with elation. It would have been unthinkable for him on any other occasion to show such emotion during negotiations. "Quite the generous offer. I suppose the Holy Coins make it worth it on your end." The price almost seemed too good to be true to Gorgon, but he assumed that the Demon Lord wanted Holy Coins, and fast. The natural conclusion was that the coins would be used as bribes to further extend his influence in Holylight.

The Demon Lord, apparently tired from the long meeting, silently signaled Mitsuhide. "Why don't we take a recess for a moment? I hear you're a man who knows his spirits, Don."

"Very well. I've prepared a rare wine...?!" Gorgon twisted the end of his sentence, seeing that Mitsuhide had produced a bottle of fire spirit. Gorgon was speechless. The notoriously human-hating dwarves would have never parted with a bottle of fire spirit, at least not easily. *Did he buy it off of a Holylight noble at an exorbitant price...?* Gorgon thought of a deep forest. His company did have a connection with a group of dwarves who traded a small amount of their goods with them once a year. In other words, any fire spirit in human society originated with Gorgon's deal. The thought brought a smug comfort to Gorgon, but it didn't last long; Mitsuhide then produced a bottle that he

recognized as thunder water.

“Impossible...! How do you...?!”

Thunder water was a spirit that even Gorgon found difficult to obtain. The dwarves stubbornly refused to even entertain the thought of selling one to him. He had considered the stuff impossible to procure without robbing the dwarves by force.

The Demon Lord coolly poured a glass of the liquor. “I made a friend who knows how to have a good drink. His liquor is some of the best I’ve had.”

He boasts of his personal connection with the dwarves...?! Gorgon lamented.

The Demon Lord meant no ill intent. In fact, he had served his best drink to make future dealings with Gorgon smoother.

Gorgon, on the other hand, took it as a power play that the Demon Lord was pouring a glass full of a drink that even he struggled to get his hands on.

Catherine took Gorgon’s glass from the Demon Lord and used her Angel’s Spoon skill to verify the drink wasn’t poisoned. “It is safe, Don.”

“Thank you...” Gorgon only ate and drank what Catherine deemed safe to do so. There had been several times in his youth when he, out of a rebellious heart, refused Catherine’s advice and ended up half-dead.

Gorgon silently tilted his glass, and the Demon Lord followed suit. The first thunder water he tasted in years cracked a smile across Gorgon’s face as an electrifying sensation filled his mouth.

Relieved to see a smile on her don’s face, Catherine asked, “How does it taste?”

“The dwarves may have a superiority complex, but this drink is something else. I wish we were drinking this alone on a snowy night...”

The Demon Lord awkwardly averted his eyes from them. Lighting a cigarette, he wondered who the elderly woman was. *They’re too close for her to be a maid or secretary... I’ve got it! That’s his grandmother!* the Demon Lord concluded. Of course, not many people could have accurately guessed Gorgon and Catherine would be a couple. *He’s a young man who loves his*

grandmother... You don't see many of them these days. He's not so bad. The Demon Lord, affected by the culture of modern-day Japan where family ties had lessened, improved his opinion of Gorgon.

"This bottle of thunder water is yours, Don. Enjoy it together."

"Are you sure...? This is certainly a surprise."

Gorgon had received plenty of gifts and bribes before from people pleading for favors. None of those bribes had moved Gorgon—he was the leader of one of the best trading companies on the continent, after all. There was almost nothing he couldn't get his hands on himself. Thunder water and coal, however, were two things that Gorgon would have never acquired on his own. He stood up with a certain resolve.

"Demon Lord, I would like to show you something special... My greatest treasure."

"I am intrigued."

They left the guesthouse and walked to the port where a giant steamboat was docked.

The Demon Lord wore a shocked look before something clicked in his mind, and he began eyeing the boat up and down. *Prehistoric technology... This is proof that there was more advanced technology in the past.* The steamboat was an old fashioned one by the Demon Lord's standards, with large paddle wheels on either side: a paddle steamer. While most steamboats in modern day used screw propellers, paddles were used for some tour boats.

Mitsuhide's jaw dropped until she realized that they were in the middle of a business deal, after which she clamped it shut and put on a breezy mask.

The Demon Lord was reminded of the modern factory in the Bastille Dungeon that appeared to be a renewable production line of monsters. He continued appraising the steamboat. "No wonder you want coal... Blackstones."

"Well, yes..." Gorgon was rather disappointed by the Demon Lord's reaction, which was almost nonexistent after seeing his Ancient Fragment.

Gorgon's ship had been dubbed useless and immobile, "a floating coffin" by

others he had chosen to share his secret with. If the Demon Lord had laughed at it, he had planned to laugh right back in his face.

“How many of these do you have, Don?” the Demon Lord asked.

“Only three now... But I hear another is hidden in Roses, out west. I intended to collect every single one that remains in the world.” Gorgon stroked Catherine’s shoulder to comfort himself; the Demon Lord was tolerant, but his young companion had been getting on his nerves. He would have preferred to kick Mitsuhide into the ocean.

The Demon Lord smiled as he watched. *He still takes care of his grandmother... For a young guy, he’s got a good perspective.* He looked to his side and decided to tug on Mitsuhide’s ponytail. She gave him a puzzled look, but the Demon Lord continued.

Gorgon now looked revolted, pitying the Demon Lord for his abnormal fetish. “Demon Lord, you knew this ship was powered by coal.”

“Indeed.”

“You did...” Gorgon suddenly spread his arms wide and began to shout, like a child boasting his toy collection. “I want to roam free all over the continent with this Ancient Fragment! Neither my grandfather nor my father, who ruined my clan with madness, could achieve such a feat. I’ll pay you anything to achieve that goal. However! I do not tolerate betrayal.” Gorgon icily stared down the Demon Lord, enough to make Mitsuhide raise her guard.

The Demon Lord seemed unaffected. “There’s nothing to worry about. My mines will never run dry. You’ll have enough coal to take this boat anywhere you want to. Once I set up the Roundhouse, steam engine trains are in the picture too.” The Demon Lord’s vision for the future might come at great cost to Tahara’s mental health.

Gorgon, on the other hand, looked confused by the unfamiliar vocabulary. “You know something about Ancient Fragments.”

“That might be true.”

The vague answer irritated Gorgon, but the Demon Lord had spoken honestly. He knew about steamboats, for example, but “Ancient” in this world denoted so

many things lost to history. He knew nothing of the Angels, for example.

“Will the boat not work on burning wood?”

“You don’t think I’ve tried...? Clearly, it doesn’t.”

“I see.” The Demon Lord thought this strange. Steamboats on Earth could have been propelled by burning wood as well as coal. He got a feeling that the restriction almost seemed manufactured, like a predetermined rule.

To Gorgon, his question came across as a backhanded reminder that he was in desperate need of the Demon Lord’s Blackstones. He gritted his teeth for the sake of finally mobilizing his boat.

“Just to be sure, Demon Lord, I am your only buyer of Blackstone?”

“Of course. I don’t intend to sell to anyone else,” the Demon Lord answered bluntly. He could not be bothered to go through another lengthy negotiation.

Gorgon, from his experience in trading, heard truth in the Demon Lord’s answer. “In that case... I will forgive everything. Water under the bridge. You gain your Holy Coins and payment, I gain Blackstones.”

“That’s right. I’m looking forward to this boat racing across the open seas. There’s something romantic about it.”

“R-Romantic...? It is my life’s work.”

Gorgon and the Demon Lord shook hands to formalize their deal: the exclusive export of Blackstone. To the Demon Lord, this was a training opportunity for a workforce he needed in the future. To Gorgon, this was part of his lifelong obsession to finally outdo his father and grandfather, who had destroyed his clan. When the steamboat finally moved, it would take the continent by storm. The people would take note of Gorgon in a different light, and his fame would influence his business. People would flock to whichever port the steamboat docked in, clamoring to buy products brought in by it. Naturally, this led to Gorgon’s other passion: the creation of Top-Tier equipment by human hands alone. When he accomplished that, his name would be carved forever in history.

The Demon Lord was beginning to see Gorgon as a child after seeing him care

for his grandmother and loudly declare that he wanted his special boat to move. “A trip around the world...”

“What did you say?”

“With this boat, you could gift her something like that.”

“Around the world... With this ship...?” Gorgon fell speechless.

“Until we meet again, Don,” the Demon Lord bid him.

“Y-Yes...”

With their intentions slightly misaligned, the conflict in the north reached its conclusion.

Meanwhile, Ren was approaching her meeting with the Paladin, the people of the slums in tow.

——En route to Rookie, Northern Nations.

I bet that's how it's going down right now, Tahara Communicated to Ren as if they had watched the interaction between the Demon Lord and Gorgon's meeting with their own eyes.

Providing work to those who need it. Another display of Master's mercy, Ren answered.

Yeah, yeah.

Ren was on her way to Rookie with the residents of the slums in tow.

Naturally, Tahara and Ren had each interpreted the Demon Lord's meeting in dramatically different ways. Tahara had drawn a conclusion from the construction of the Abandoned Mines, the value of coal in this world, and the Demon Lord's intentions for calling himself 'King.' The Demon Lord had killed four birds with one stone: the king of Euri, its people, the Jack of All Trades, and the Gorgon Company. What all began with him simply calling himself King had yielded such a spectacular reward. What's more, the Demon Lord had absorbed the refugees from the slums into the village's workforce, and was about to use them as bait to draw the Paladin out. He was certainly milking this strategy to its last drop.

Tahara agreed with Gorgon when it came to the future of Euritheis, that the country would devolve into chaos sooner or later after the fall of their tyrant, landing in their laps like a ripened fruit. He imagined the layers upon layers of his boss's scheme, which factored in even the natural outcome of Euritheis.

Good thing we've got some time to breathe before the fruit'll fall. If only the Secretary could make a habit of slowing down so the rest of us could catch up.

I believe Master took a slower approach for the sake of the village.

The Demon Lord would have been nonplussed by the conversation if he had heard, but the concept itself was quite ordinary. A comparable event in Japanese history was when Oda Nobunaga defeated the Takeda clan in the battle of Nagashino, but retreated without pursuing. If Nobunaga had continued to conquer their territory, the Takeda clan would have fought back tooth and nail to defend their homeland and families. Nobunaga, however, almost ignored the Takeda territory after his grand victory, as if he foresaw the collapse of his enemies. A few years later, the territory became Nobunaga's with hardly any bloodshed.

You can never really conquer patriotic people... Tahara said, thinking of the Empire.

I agree. No rule is ironclad without its subjects wanting us.

Yeah... I'll keep that in mind, Tahara chuckled, picking up on Ren's warning that their rule should be beneficial enough for the people to give their allegiance willingly.

About the Blackstones, Tahara...

Don't sweat it. The Secretary plans on setting up the Roundhouse, and already set aside land to lay down the railroad. First route'll be from the village to the Holy City. With enough labor, we can move onto the Freeway next.

Most traveled roads are unpaved, which makes this journey harder than necessary.

We can barely move stuff around. I want to move people and goods at ten times the speed they're going now.

Their Communication continued, the pair of them attempting to make the Demon Lord's fleeting amusement in the prospect of running trains a reality. What made things worse was that Tahara and Ren actually had the ability to make the trains a reality.

How much do you think Master is asking for the Blackstones?

Knowing the Secretary, it's gonna be almost too cheap to be true.

I agree.

This was another fact that Tahara and Ren did not share an interpretation on. Ren thought the Demon Lord was selling coal for cheap to improve the technology and quality of life of the common people. Tahara, on the other hand, expected the Demon Lord to once again make popular a fuel that had long dried up in this world and weaponize their monopoly. Cutting off the supply after coal was popularized, for example, would devastate any enemy nation. Embargoes and sanctions have been an effective tactic throughout history.

Humans, as selfish as they were, struggled to lower their standards once they were raised. Once they got a taste of steamboats and steam engine trains, no one would want to go without them. The popularity of the Hot Springs Resort was partially due to the air conditioning: just another example of becoming acclimated to convenience.

I think we should popularize charcoal just as much. That would relieve the people from the oppressive prices of Spell Stones.

Yeah, this'll be one of the most popular plans of the Secretary's.

Every human needed fire and water in their life. Even the poorest of the poor needed access to each to survive. The Demon Lord had liberated the village of Rabbi from its lack of water, and it seemed like he was now going to do the same for fire. If his policies reached every corner of Holylight, his support would be as guaranteed as finding a flame under smoke.

Then I'll leave you to deal with the minister... And the ones this Eyze picked out of the crowd.

Understood.

Eyze and his newbie partner had joined the migration without a hitch, Ren accepting the Demon Lord's business card from them without question. They had been tasked with picking out dangerous figures and reporting them. Most of the residents of the slums had been tricked into debt by Jack, but some of them were hardened criminals.

Having discerned most unsavory types from the crowd, Eyze timidly spoke to Ren. To him, she was a girl far beyond his comprehension. She seemed like a flawless angel, and at the same time, he felt an overwhelming terror from within her that even surpassed the horror of a high-rank devil.

"Um, well... Miss Ren... We gathered them into a single group."

"Thank you."

Ren's gaze made Eyze's spine freeze. Her pure aura, unapproachable elegance, blizzard-like coldness, and unparalleled beauty—she was far too perfect and far too incomprehensible. He would have sooner believed that Ren was a supernatural being.

He took his leave from Ren as quickly as he could, rejoining his partner and sweating bullets from merely standing in close proximity to her.

"It's not fair, Mister Eyze... You could let me make reports once in a while."

"You idiot! Who knows what stupid thing you'll say if I send you...?" Eyze shuddered to imagine their fate if they were to ignite Ren's wrath. He couldn't very well trust his rookie partner with the task.

"She's so cute... Look at her, she even dresses cute!"

"Must be nice to be you..."

"Doesn't she feel like a gallant princess, cute but unapproachable?"

"Once you mature, you won't be able to look her in the eyes."

The spear in Ren's hand gave Eyze visions of hell itself. Ren had indeed wielded Ningen Mukotsu to slay countless formidable foes.

"What's the minister thinking anyway...?"

"Yeah, it's not fair! It's an abuse of power!"

The minister was presently displaying a doting smile for the fear-inspiring girl, like a generational butler born to defend his mistress.

“Looks like he’s got his brains beneath the belt, like you.”

“Don’t put me in the same category as him! I have much purer intentions...”

“Yeah, yeah...” Eyze held his tongue and waved his hand at his partner. Still, he couldn’t help but reconsider the value of character and connections upon watching the minister. Great business deals and national projects had been decided by such matters, after all. If the minister’s new employer had been on the front lines, however, he would have never adopted such a disposition. He would have kept his guard up against the Demon Lord, who would only appear to be a new and improved Jack. With Ren as the liaison, Eyze suspected that she would have the minister entranced by the time the migration was complete.

Indeed, the minister was happily speaking to Ren, riding beside her. “So he actually had no relation to Heaven’s Ward.”

“No. Master is feared by some, but he is a very kind man.”

“I have heard rumors of his aggressive tactics in Holylight...”

“Worry not. You will see with your own eyes the world Master is building. I will gladly be your guide.”

“Mm, mm. Indeed,” the minister laughed. He felt strangely elated in the girl’s presence, the mugginess within him clearing up like he was entirely rejuvenated. The sight of her clothes alone made him reminisce of his youth. He even felt the urge to shout, just as he had shouted at the open sea he faced in the City States when he was younger.

Admiring Ren’s sailor-style outfit, he said, “Your attire is forever enchanting.”

“It is a dear possession of mine. Master gave it to me.”

“I would love to import it into our country...”

“I hear there is an excellent fashion designer in the village of Rabbi. You may also consider treating your weariness at the Hot Springs Resort.”

“I shall look forward to it,” the minister laughed again, not comprehending what a “Hot Springs Resort” was. He was in vacation mode, overcome by a

sense of freedom he had long forgotten under Jack's rule. The minister wondered what man would not be over the moon with such an unbelievably beautiful girl by his side. He considered this a well-deserved reward for his decade of excruciating work.

"We should be arriving at Rookie soon," the minister announced. Thanks to careful planning, the caravan had carried on without delay, and was just arriving at the city of Rookie. Now the minister would be put to good use: he produced a thorough letter from the king of Euri to obtain permission for entry. The process was easy, thanks to the party announcing their arrival ahead of time. What's more, with the news of Jack's fall, the Republic of Edogawa was focusing their efforts to not rock the boat.

Ren turned to the streets of Rookie, where she was told the Paladin had been working on restoring the city. She was to convince the famous hero to join the emigration.

Urin, the girl from the slums, smiled at Ren. "*Mishtresh* Ren! What kind of village does Mashter King have?"

Ren responded kindly to the familiar girl. "A splendiferous one, to be sure..."

"Shplen...?"

"A very pretty place. These people will be working in the casi— Golden Temple."

"G-Golden Temple?! Mashter King has a house of gold?!"

"Of course. Nothing is impossible for Master."

"Wow!"

The casino the Demon Lord had set up was modeled after a real-life establishment in Las Vegas. Its extravagance was literally otherworldly, its interior cementing its title of Golden Temple with actual piles of gold passing hands at various tables. The facility embodied this double entendre.

"Someone's coming, *Mishtresh* Ren!"

"He must be the Paladin..." Even from afar, Ren could see that the small-statured man was a master of his craft. With an icy gaze, she awaited the

approach of the man she had heard much about.

——The City of Rookie, Northern Nations.

This was a city of hopeful adventurers looking to make a living through dungeon-crawling. At present, however, the Bastille Dungeon was locked down following the Invasion, filling the streets with men and women out of work. The city had recovered from the worst of its disorder under the leadership of the Paladin, but the cityscape made it evident that it would still be some time before it returned to normalcy.

Weeb had been working day and night conducting the restoration, concluding his days by reading the daily letter from Hummer.

“Mister Daruma really is an honest man...” Weeb muttered gently, though he still failed to remember Hummer’s name.

Hummer, the studious man that he was, detailed his days and sent the letters to Rookie. At first he had sent them through postal carriers, but had begun using a high elemental of Wind called Garude after Hummer’s diligent correspondence became more akin to diary pages.

Weeb chuckled at Hummer’s endless straightforwardness. “How strange... My day doesn’t feel complete without reading his letter.” The contents of which were the humdrum life of the talentless middle-aged man; it was the sort of letter that didn’t seem worth a Paladin’s time, but Weeb had come to look forward to the post.

Of course, there was some information that drew Weeb’s attention. “A hospital where the poor line up in droves...”

Rumors of Yu’s Field Hospital had reached even the Northern Nations, saying that any injury or illness was cured on the spot. Most snickered at the preposterous rumor, but some seriously contemplated the tale. Those with severe health conditions might have been willing to grasp at straws. The letter continued to explain that Hummer was feeling down because a young lady had insulted him; he wrote of the bitchlet that teased him day after day.

“I think this lady has feelings for you, Mister Daruma...” Weeb wasn’t a man

of romance himself, but he couldn't help but smile reading about Hummer's humdrum yet eventful days. In his endless solitary battle to save every person on the continent, Weeb had found a sort of respite in these letters. "How ironic... To find the peace of ordinary life in the Fallen Angel's village..."

The Northern Nations were filled with war, poverty, plagues, and displaced peoples. Those too poor to buy medicine dropped like flies, and starving refugees survived on stewed tree bark. Peaceful life was inconceivable to them; everyday life to them was nothing but hellish torture.

The post brought Weeb surprising news at this moment, telling of the fall of Jack, the de facto ruler of Euritheis.

"King of Heaven's Ward...?" Weeb had heard the name, but a mere mercenary taking on the ruler of a nation was very strange.

After a series of follow-ups, he astutely sensed the Demon Lord behind the incident. "A long, black coat, the girl who annihilated the Five Stars, Jack's fall, and the residents of the slums moving to Holylight...? Then the Gorgon Company in the City States..." Weeb could only make conjectures from sporadic information; the one confirmed fact was Jack's dethroning. Weeb concluded that the Gorgon Company welcomed the change in power very much. *Worst case scenario, Gorgon might have struck a deal with the Fallen Angel...* Weeb's worst-case scenario was accurate.

"What is he trying to do...?" he muttered again, confused by the picture the Demon Lord was painting. Ridding a country of its tyrant and taking on the oppressed people of the slums almost seemed heroic.

As the Paladin wrestled with the conundrum, the migration rapidly approached.

He couldn't find his answer before the fateful day: the two-thousand-plus person caravan had arrived, clamoring in the streets of Rookie.

The Trinary scouted the arrival with frowns. "Sir Weeb. They are indeed..."

"The Euritheis flag. Yes, they should be the former residents of their slums," Weeb appraised coolly. The transport would have looked like a massive human trafficking operation if it wasn't for the meticulousness of the soldiers guarding

them. A dedicated supply team could even be found at rearguard, reminiscent of a military march.

“This is the second time he’s taken a large population into his territory,” Kaiya, the leader of the Trinary, noted.

Altema stroked his mustache and scoffed sarcastically, “Ridiculous. He only means to enslave them.”

“That vile Demon Lord... He must be vanquished at once!” Mushroom shook his fists.

As the Trinary voiced their opinions, Weeb’s thoughts were entirely taken up by the girl with a strange outfit and freezing aura. He easily concluded that she was the one responsible for taking down the Five Stars... And this girl was looking back at him.

“How peculiar. Everyone in the group looks entirely content.”

“Then they aren’t slaves...?” Kaiya asked.

A drove of enslaved people would have appeared much more sorrowful. This caravan, though, was filled with hopeful faces.

“It seems they want a word with me,” Weeb said and started towards the pair approaching him. One was the minister of Euritheis whom he knew well, and the other was the girl as beautiful and sharp as obsidian.

The minister cheerfully called, “Paladin! It has been too long.”

“Indeed, it has...” Weeb still gave all of his attention to the girl, his hairs standing on end in her presence.

Ren returned his gaze with similar attention, the two facing each other down to analyze every detail.

“Let’s save our pleasantries for another time, for we must be signing in at the city office,” the minister announced. “Until then, Paladin.”

“I’ll be looking forward to it.”

The minister headed into the city with a pep in his step. While the restoration efforts were ongoing, the largest debris had been cleared, greatly improving the

view of the streets.

After the minister left, Ren gave a formal bow, and Weeb answered with his own, hand to chest.

“My name is Ren. You must be the Paladin Master spoke of.”

“I have been called that... He’s the one orchestrating this?”

“Yes. He will provide work, pay, and shelter to the starving people.”

“I don’t mean to be rude... But I don’t see how that desolate village can support such a large population.” Weeb only knew the pre—Demon Lord Rabbi, which could hardly support its own population, let alone such a large influx. It was ridiculous to pretend that it could provide work and shelter to these people. Even if they were slaves, they would require water and food to survive, as well as substantial tasks to put their labor to good use. Managing worker slaves was easier said than done.

“What do you expect me to do...?” Weeb asked with self-deprecation. He had spent half of his life helping the poor. Tragically, war raged on throughout the continent, producing more and more poverty and destitution. He could travel from country to country serving meals, but the best he could hope for was a temporary relief to the hunger of some. It was like working to extinguish a fire only to have more blaze up all around him. Nothing felt more like wasted effort.

“Your efforts so far have been honorable,” said Ren. “But there is a limit to saving people through food alone. Master provides salvation through business and employment, which will bring profit and more business... Until he reshapes the entire continent.”

“Reshapes the continent...?” Weeb felt dizzy at the enormous proportions. That was a deed no human was capable of; it was one that required a miracle to create the heavens and earth anew. “He went to the lengths of defeating Jack, just for labor?”

“The foolish and powerless will crumble in Master’s presence.”

Weeb pushed his glasses up and gave a dry chuckle. “He’s as persuasive as always.” The Demon Lord had so easily accomplished a feat that Weeb had hesitated to out of fear of diplomatic repercussions. The Demon Lord paid no

heed to diplomacy and simply carried on towards his end goal, blasting anyone who stood in his way. “Perhaps all higher beings are this way...”

Ren did not disagree with Weeb. Her master *was* a higher being who ruled the world; it was self-evident. “Master wishes you to accompany us. If you seek change, come with me to Rabbi.”

“Change...” Weeb thought of the Conclave. In the Tzardom, boys sixteen years of age were gathered to select the next Paladin using the Holy Garb Box. That day, he had wished to change the world, and vowed to save the poor.

It’s been ten years already... War continued to cycle, and those in power resorted to any means necessary to serve their ambitions. Amidst droughts and plagues, men in their prime were drafted to war, leaving countless farms stranded. Many villages were pillaged to extinction altogether.

‘Someone snoozing away,’ did he say...? Weeb thought of the insults the Demon Lord had once thrown at him.

The Great Light...? It’s beyond a pipe dream. If such a grand being exists, why are you doing any work? Let this ‘Light’ use its miracles to save the poor today!

These words had echoed painfully in Weeb’s mind. It was the same question that had plagued him throughout his travels: why does the Light ignore such travesties all over the continent? Why wouldn’t it answer the people’s prayers and save them?

“He has shown his intentions through his actions,” said Weeb, watching the people of the slums. It was unthinkable by the standards of this world that the Demon Lord was going to give them shelter and work, let alone pay them. “I see... I want to see with my own eyes how they will be treated.” After touring various nations, he had developed a strong distrust for anyone with power. Promises had been broken overnight; he resolved to see this through with his own eyes, especially now that a second caravan of people was bound for Rabbi. He was played like a fiddle, refusing to turn a blind eye.

Once Weeb had carefully made his decision, Ren said, “I think you’ll be surprised when you witness Master’s world... And become very busy.”

Weeb stared back at Ren and her prophecy. If anything else, Weeb was sure

to be surprised when he encountered the modern-day hospital where there worked a doctor who could heal any ailment, not to mention the endless well, fountain, and a divine forest that healed people on its own.

The village of Rabbi was already filled with countless miracles beyond the comprehension of this world. The village of Rabbi was Akira Ono's world. It would be interesting to see which was the true fantasy world.

Actors in the Wings

Like bugs scattered to the wind, the nobles of Holylight were pathetically dismayed as the Demon Lord made his impact up north. Dona, the leader of the Central nobles, had called for action, and was promptly answered by his sympathizers. They triggered a civil war when neutrality was not an option. All to protect their families, the nobles scrambled to gather information that they exchanged at secret meetings, asking the vital question: which side would win? The Central or militaristic nobles? Naturally, many had initially sided with the Central nobles' cause, owing largely to their wealth, numbers, and status. The debate, however, was endless. Making the wrong choice now would guarantee the fall of their house.

"You are all forgetting one important factor: Gatekeeper."

"Indeed, that fortress..."

"I hear it demands triple the men to seize that place."

Some were displaying half-learned knowledge from historical battle records.

They clamored at every turn of the war, their debate further devolving.

The first decision maker was the Madam and the other nobles joining the fray. She publicly announced her solidarity with the militaristic nobles, bashing Dona for driving up the prices of Spell Stones. This came as less of a shock than when her sister joined in.

"Even the artistic nobles..."

"What is going on?!"

"Defying Madam Buttersauce would ruin your reputation in the art world..."

"But Sir Dona controls *water*. We mustn't forget this."

With news of foreign reinforcements, their brains were nearing implosion. The Salamander Knights were sent from the Tzardom of Light, and additional reinforcements were coming from Xenobia, the dark horse of the North. What

made matters even worse was Suneo announcing financial backing for its allies; many nobles sent messengers to Suneo to uncover the meaning of this, and returned with word of one million gold medallions, convinced of Suneo's dedication to the conflict. One could only imagine the confusion that swept the yet-unaligned nobles. They had never expected such a large-scale conflict.

The minds of the indecisive, however, were finally made for them with the news of the military nobles' crushing defeat.

——Central Holylight.

A small battalion of militaristic nobles were marching, begging for water.

Dona, who held a monopoly on Water Spell Stones, had drastically driven up their price. White set up water stations throughout the country to combat the issue, but there were far too many affected; there was no chance of saving the entire parched population that wandered and waited in long lines at these stations.

"One bucket of water?! That's not enough!"

"I have four children!"

"Wait for your turn, asshole!"

The outraged populace gathered for water, starting brawls out of frustration. Was this a display of humanity's shortcomings, or Dona's?

A Central noble troop mocked those affected, attacking the water station for leisure.

"Get out of our sight... Worms!"

"The water's wasted on filth like you!"

"What an eyesore. Just die of thirst already."

They massacred the crowd with their spears as if they were culling sheep. Others fired arrows into the crowd as if they were hunting deer.

"Hunting sheep is some sport, but look there. Isn't that a troop of the northern savages?"

“How fitting...”

“Their heads will make fine souvenirs.”

The Central troop in glimmering armor pursued the militaristic soldiers, who scattered at the sight of their enemies.

“Look how far the militaristic nobles have fallen!”

“Why don’t those savages drink the piss of their horses?”

The militaristic faction suffered defeat after defeat, the news of which spread through the grapevine. A few large battles followed, but the Central nobles, with wind in their sails, snagged their victories with ease. With the war tipping day by day in the favor of the Central faction, many of the fence-sitting nobles flocked to side with Dona.

To make matters worse, a territory hesitant to choose a side was razed by a knight’s order sent from the Tzardom: a brutal warning against anyone who would join the militaristic nobles. Out of fear of the Salamander Knights and their savagery, many houses swore their loyalty to Dona.

Of course, the other side of the conflict did not take this lying down. They continued to execute their strategies, but were nonetheless bested by the Central nobles. For example, supply troops had been sent from the Madam’s territory on numerous occasions, but the Central battalions had intercepted and plundered all of them en route. With his control over the water supply as his greatest weapon, Dona had neutralized the militaristic nobles before the war had officially begun.

By this time, the soldiers of Xenobia had joined the Tzardom’s knights in pillaging the supply troops and villages throughout Holylight. The entirety of the nation felt like it had been dried to the bone and burned alive. They might as well have been conquered by a foreign force.

The land was filled with cries of lamentation as the war seemed all but won by the Central nobles.

——Gatekeeper, Northern Holylight.

Amidst the news of bitter defeats on the battleground, the fortress was alight with excitement; the water shortage was all a ruse. Even now, the militaristic nobles carried water out of the Public Bath by the bucketful, delivering it to each household.

“Keep them coming! The water never stops!”

“Woo hoo! This never gets old!”

“Stop cheering like a boy and get going!”

“Ha ha ha! Daddy’s getting yelled at again!”

Soldiers, women, and children together took part in the relay of water. There were other women hammering heated swords or affixing arrowheads with babies on their backs. A good number of women were laundering clothes, using plenty of water. In contrast to Central noble women, northern ladies had a fierce temper.

“When did Sir Harts secure such an ally...?”

“Ten *thousand* gold medallions! I couldn’t stop shaking when I first saw it.”

“With that much money, we can hold down the fort as long as we need to. I knew we could rely on our leader!”

The box full of said gold medallions theatrically occupied a large room in the fortress: the gift from Suneo, surrounded by combat supplies sent from the Republic. With the enormous amount of goods donated by the Madam still secure in their warehouse, the fortress was better stocked than ever before, in stark contrast to public perception.

In the command room of the fortress, Harts welcomed Sambo back as he returned from completing various missions outside the fort.

“Well done, Sambo.”

“Not a problem. Just a quick stroll beyond the walls.”

“It’s not easy to fake a defeat while keeping casualties down. Brilliant work.”

“They seemed like hunters shooting for sport. Those callow nobles must have gotten a much-needed confidence boost from their little heists.”

Harts smirked. After their performance of fleeing through the country in search of water, the embodiments of arrogance that were the Central nobles had further been egged on by the prospect of victory: they had become juggernauts, like a speeding truck with its brake line cut. Harts could take on an army assured of false victory easier than he could take candy from a baby. Sambo had staged a crushing defeat by leaving flags and weapons behind, making sure to stroke the ego of the Central soldiers.

“I can only imagine your frustration to have to turn your back on those fools... We owe everyone an apology.”

“Oh please, we began to enjoy the race of who can scuttle away the fastest.” Sambo proudly pounded his chest. He was willing to endure embarrassment if it contributed to victory any day.

The Central nobles, on the other hand, would have found the strategy unthinkable. They had to act as tough and elegant as possible in perpetual performance—that was the essence of high society.

“That public bath is quite the place...” Sambo reiterated as he watched the soldiers relay bucket after bucket of water. The construction of the bizarre facility had completely changed life within the fortress.

“Look, Sir Harts! The women bathe and launder every day now!”

“We’ve become much more hygienic.”

Water from the public bath served as drinking and cooking water as well as water for laundry. It had become a massive trend within the fortress to conclude each day with a bath.

“Gatekeeper has never seen this many supplies either...”

“None of the credit is due to me. It was all under *his* direction,” Harts remarked, shaking at the thought once again. Before he knew it, the fortress had been flooded with relief supplies from the Butterflies, Suneo, and the Kid Company. None of them were exactly easy to deal with, and securing the assistance of all three parties seemed comparable to wizardry.

Sambo, who wasn’t privy to the detailed procedure of the Demon Lord, chimed in. “Money, supplies, and water... It’s hard to believe we were

struggling to provide any of the three not long ago.”

“He came and changed everything for the better.”

When it was all said and done, the fortress had indeed undergone incredible changes. It seemed like a lifetime ago that they were struggling to get their hands on even salt.

“He really has returned...” Sambo muttered.

Harts knew full well who he spoke of: the Fallen Angel Lucifer, the ruler of night.

“The bandage he produced instantly brought me back from the brink of death.”

“And light was restored to my eyes in no time at all...”

“The village of Rabbi is filled with bizarre facilities. A paradise called the Hot Springs Resort, a divine unending fountain, a forest where one’s injuries heal just by lying beneath its trees, a temple glimmering with gold...” Harts felt ridiculous. How could any number of humans build such facilities? It felt nothing short of a miracle from the Great Light.

“Will you serve the ruler of night, Sir Harts?”

Harts answered with prolonged silence. He had lost count of how many times he had contemplated the question; the resurrection of the Fallen Angel Lucifer seemed to defy all reason.

Hesitating further, Harts articulated, “Our lives have changed—drastically—and so has the world we live in.”

“Indeed. The news of you and *the* Madam joining forces shook the nation.”

“Our nation has changed too. So have the Holy Maidens. The ones who remain stagnant are the Central nobles.”

“Many of Holylight’s people will die of thirst.”

“If I were to choose between a fool who parches the country and someone who freely provides infinite water, I will always side with the latter, even if he is a fallen angel.” Harts pushed out a long breath. He was willing to put his faith in

the Demon Lord because he hadn't lost his faith in the Angels.

"I will do as you say, Sir Harts."

"Are you sure...?"

"I do not comprehend the intricacies of all this, but I owe that doctor big time. And look at them, Sir Harts. They're beaming with excitement."

Harts stood next to Sambo to observe the open area, where men raced each other carrying buckets of water with women slapping their men's behinds. Beside them, children were laughing and playing, soaking each other.

"I am more self-serving than you give me credit for," Sambo said. "I'll gladly follow anyone who brings laughter and plenty to this humble land!"

Harts chuckled, but couldn't help but agree. He was duty bound to protect his people and their livelihoods.

"Shall we begin?" Sambo asked.

"Yes. Let's show them what real war is like."

The pair exited the command room, laughing.

Meanwhile, the Central nobles reveled in their assured victory day in and day out.

——Wise Angel Gatekeeper, Dona's territory.

In this fortress built on so much innocent blood, celebratory balls were held daily. One could say a noble's job was to attend parties to begin with, but combined with the victorious news that kept flowing in, the Central nobles were on cloud nine.

"Look at this helmet. I took it from a northern savage."

"The militaristic faction can barely hold a sword beyond the walls of Gatekeeper!"

"My battalion retrieved a flag of theirs."

"The Madam's a woman who knows nothing of battle, after all."

“Hear, hear! Her supply troops are the ones that keep us going!”

They seemed enamored with the practice of showing off their loot and demeaning their enemy.

“A spectacular move. I hear supplies from Suneo have been embargoed by other Northern Nations.”

“Hunting a cornered beast. This is the way of *true* nobility!”

Their excitement, stoked by their chain of victories, was further fueled by wine. Various instruments played in the ballroom, men and women dancing in the center, surrounded by tables lavishly adorned with dishes far beyond the reach of commoners. Dona, the leader of the Central nobles, and his nephew Shrimp shared one such table, their cheeks reddened from drink.

“Your scheme was brilliant, Shrimp.”

“Your wealth was the driving force, Uncle. I only supplied an idea.”

“But now there’s no sport in it. Did we overestimate our opponent?”

“Humans can’t survive for three days without water. Apparently those savages were human after all.”

Dona guffawed.

While the militaristic faction would never have to worry about drought again thanks to the Public Bath set up by the Demon Lord, the rest of Holylight was suffering; they were fighting over the little water they had in some regions, and water robbers were running rampant. Each village set up their own protection, but matters were not improving, especially now with Xenobia and the Tzardom joining the fray. The Central army usually chased away the militaristic faction and called it a victory, but not these foreign forces. The Xenobia army pillaged any land that didn’t belong to the Central nobles, while the Tzardom troops set ablaze any village or town they came across under the guise of hunting Satanists. No water, burning towns, and foreign bandits had devastated Holylight through and through.

“The hounds of Xenobia are tearing regions apart at the seams.”

“I always enjoyed their handiwork. The measly bugs forget they are only alive

because of our great compassion if they are not reminded of it from time to time.” Dona and Shrimp both considered commoners to be nothing more than beasts who needed to be whipped to learn a lesson.

“But *he’s* another story.”

“General Leon... Apparently there’s good reason for him not so much as greeting you, Uncle.” Shrimp eyed the party. The famous general had abstained from the ballroom and battlefield, remaining in his room at all times. “Heroes tend to be a bit eccentric...”

“Who needs heroes in this day and age? Leave the general in the dusty past where he belongs, alongside Harts!” Dona spat and silently pouted.

Seeing this, Shrimp leaned in to whisper in his ear, “Now, now, Uncle... I have another piece of good news.”

“What is it?”

“The leader of the Holy Knights’ Order, who Lady White must rely heavily upon, has been *persuaded* to join our causes.”

“What?!”

The Holy Knights’ Order was a group dedicated to the defense of the Holy City that occasionally served under a Holy Maiden’s command. Out of all the candidates to double-cross Holylight...

“It took some time, but he is en route with three thousand knights in tow.”

“Fantastic! That’s my nephew!” Dona slapped Shrimp on his back, valuing the psychological attack on White even more than the addition of three thousand soldiers.

Eyes in the room gathered on Dona as he stood from his glorified throne. “Hear this, everyone! My dear nephew has turned the leader of the Holy Knights’ Order. He’s rushing here as we speak with three thousand men,” he declared triumphantly.

The ballroom reverberated with applause. They thought that the knights had taken quite long enough to see reality. The Holy Knights’ Order totaled about eight thousand, but without their leader, they were of no real consequence.

“He certainly took his time... Apparently they’re only trained to swing their swords and empty their minds.”

“What can you expect from a commoner?”

“Oh, hush. He’s on our side now. Besides, every noble needs a guard dog.”

As the nobles spewed their entitlement, Dona seized the opportunity to theatrically reinvigorate his faction. “Our nation has long been ruined by useless filth. Our fearless ancestors, who fought alongside the Wise Angel to vanquish the King of Devils, are rolling in their graves! Now is the time to make our stand and retake our nation for our noble bloodlines!”

The crowd roared, drunken with wine and zeal. It was an effective speech, appealing to the nobles’ pride in their family trees. Of course, Dona had an ulterior motive to topple his political opponents: more wealth.

Shrimp snapped his fingers with a flourish. “Then, Uncle. You can leave the rest to me... Including the matter we’ve discussed.”

“Yes...”

A crowd of women entered the ballroom, which prompted Dona to lead them away, his nostrils flaring. This group of entirely beautiful women had been gathered forcefully by Dona to perform his *selection*. His men had practically abducted women from the four corners of his territory and sent them to Dona’s manor. This uninhibited selection process wrought many tragedies, since Dona did not consider the marital status of the ladies worthwhile. The children called the Numbered were selected in a similar process from the particularly impoverished. They served as toys that no one would miss if they were broken.

With the cloud of beautiful women about him, Dona headed to a room that emanated oppressive heat through the door.

“Wait here a moment,” he announced, and the ladies bowed in obedience.

Dona opened the door to an empty room, save for a cage in the center. This contraption was specially made for this purpose from Fire Spell Stones.

A small, snow-white creature that resembled a fennec fox lay within the cage. The creature seemed feeble, either from distress or starvation.

“You stubborn beast... Give me the Crystal, already!”

The snow fennec, as the creature was called, was a rare animal found exclusively in the fridity of snow-capped mountains. The species was now endangered from overhunting because they produced Snow Crystals, also known as nevermelt ice.

Yukikaze had once saved a snow fennec from captivity and received a Snow Crystal as a token of thanks. The fennec, however, was on the brink of death, and passed away in her arms.

“No matter,” said Dona. “If you won’t correct your insolence, I’ll continue hunting down your kind.” He threw a Fire Spell Stone through the bars, and the snow fennec leapt as best it could to avoid the heat that would cause it terrible pain. Dona continued throwing Spell Stones at the creature in a frenzy, until his blubber got the better of him and he lost his breath. “Filthy beast... Give me the Crystal! Remember well, you will never be free until you do!” His shoulders heaving as he breathed, Dona left the furnace of a room.

The fortress housed another prisoner. Far from the extravagant ballroom, Leon stood on his balcony gazing up at the stars woefully. *What am I doing here...?*

He had spent his days fighting on the front lines for Xenobia, which had destroyed his home country. Now he had been sent to fight in the civil war of Holylight, a country to which he had no connection, positive or negative.

Zorm, his former right-hand man, called to him from behind. “Another busy day at work. Loads of souvenirs today.”

“Is your *job* to rob innocent people of their possessions?”

“Dona’s the one who told me to teach the squirmy folks a lesson. I have no choice but to slaughter the men, ravish the women, and pillage their houses day after day.” Zorm burst into laughter. His armor was painted red with the blood of his enemies, and several necklaces hung from his neck in a display of his plundering.

“Stop this raiding immediately. You’re more despicable than petty bandits.”

“Lest you forget, you’re just one of the soldiers now.”

Leon gritted his teeth. Zorm had been leading Xenobia's army in Holylight to conceal Leon's absence from Xenobia, which also robbed the general of his commanding power.

"We're surprised the militaristic factions are as toothless as they are."

"There's a reason for their running... There has to be."

"Cutting off their water's the reason. All dried up before the war even began. They can barely stand."

"Don't underestimate their leader. He has been fighting on the front lines since before we were born."

"You just haven't seen them in action, stuck in your ivory tower," Zorm mocked, as a form of payback for having to follow Leon's orders under normal circumstances.

"I have a score to settle with Xenobia, but I don't condone unnecessary loss of life."

"I'm the captain. You're a soldier. When's that going to get through your thick head?"

"Then take me out to battle—"

"You stay right where you are. You're not going to lecture me in the middle of the battlefield. That's an order. Got that?"

Zorm strode out of the room, and Leon could do nothing about it.

They're trying to lower our guard... he thought. The numerous retreats, the series of supply troops that were always intercepted, the lack of water, and the massive profit in pillaging... *It's most dangerous for an army when they become complacent with victory...*

The Principality of Parma was the same when Leon had served. Every time he, their national hero, secured a victory, the palace steadily lost their sense of danger. The king cut back on military spending, refusing to listen to words of caution from the front lines. In the end, Kongming's scheme had separated Leon from his country. Constant victory was like a drug that robbed military geniuses of their logical reasoning.

It's not an easy feat to control an overconfident general on any battlefield... Harts was their general's name, as I recall. A seasoned and wise commander... He'll be difficult to deal with.

True to Leon's concern, Zorm's army would later be destroyed. His luck, however, would not run out for some time.

Meanwhile, the general of the Tzardom was enjoying a glass of wine. This was Flay, the young commander of the Salamander Knights. His knights wore matching red armor that complemented Flay's scarlet hair. His eyes burned with confidence, telling of his great pride. He tilted his glass with a flourish and took a mussel steamed with white wine. His table presented a splendid feast of venison pate, rabbit and red wine stew, roasted grouse, and crepes made with plenty of eggs and sugar.

"Not bad for a second-rate nation."

There were a few old families in the Tzardom of Light, each of them with millions of farmers under their name. Flay was the firstborn son of one such family, and had had everything handed to him on a silver platter from the moment of his birth. In addition to their land, wealth, and population, these same families congregated to select the Pope, the leader of the Tzardom. Even for the Pope, it was unwise to defy the council of these families. In fact, he walked on eggshells around Flay, the heir to one of the most powerful in the Tzardom, the Rooksanburgs.

Now, his attendant passed him a slip of paper. "Master Flay, this is the southern list."

"Hm... Fertile farmland and mines to the south..."

"I doubt there are Satanists in regions that are more well-off."

They had been sent under the pretense of finding and defeating the Satanists, but the reality of their persecution was nothing short of a witch hunt. They would search all over settlements with any excuse they could come up with and end up burning the whole place down. They acted on the savage philosophy of burn first, ask questions later.

Flay nibbled on an exquisite piece of goat milk cheese and brushed his hair back. “As long as this country continues to produce Satanists, its entire territory is subject to cleansing.”

These knights had razed any land that opposed the Tzardom, calling their massacres “the Fire of Cleansing.” Their MO had not changed since their arrival in Holylight.

“The north is one thing, but many Central nobles have their territory—”

“We mustn’t hesitate if we intend to vanquish all evil. Our fire will bring the Light and peace to this world,” Flay said. For the record, he was not drunk, but sincerely believed in this philosophy. No amount of innocent suffering would change his mind, let alone the casualties of this backwater nation. Flay could not care less. “Did you find *it* yet?”

“No, sir. Unfortunately...”

“What a dolt that bishop was... Letting my prized eagle get away.” Flay set his glass down with a bitter expression.

The Salamander Knights were the ones who had cornered Eagle, executing innocent civilians along the way. Since the capture or killing of a demi-human was met with high praise in the Tzardom, its people madly sought a chance to do so.

Flay’s attendant cautioned his master against any more overzealous actions. “Collecting the eagle should please His Holiness.”

“It’s not enough...”

“What do you mean?”

“Regaining what I’ve lost is zero-sum. It won’t bolster my name.”

“Vanquishing the Satanists and recovering the eagle would surely...”

The Pope had appointed an appropriate attendant to try and curb Flay’s recklessness, but his ambition knew no bounds.

“I need to take back the Holy Garb Box from that traitor...”

“Master Flay, that’s...” The attendant fell speechless.

Flay had believed himself to be the perfect Paladin from a young age, which was only encouraged by those around him. Who could have blamed the spoiled boy for letting that go to his head? But the Holy Garb Box, an Ancient Fragment, was not subject to nepotism. It had chosen an unknown boy born into poverty over the heir to a powerful family.

Ten years had passed since that conclave, and its decision seemed to have paid off. Weeb had fought for the people and against corrupt power. One might have shuddered to imagine the future of the continent if Flay, an embodiment of elitism, had been chosen instead.

“My Holy Garb Box, still in the possession of that useless, penniless, ugly dote...!” Flay continued to mutter curses, but even he had no power to overturn the result of the divine ritual. His talent was in burning down innocent settlements, not strategizing. Now he felt the pressure to make a name for himself.

Shrimp approached Flay. This spoiled rich boy had some cunning in him. “Longing for a grand victory?”

“Dona’s nephew... What do you know?”

“Enough to see that you want the *current* Paladin out of the way.”

“You...”

Shrimp saw Flay as nothing more than a child, one with no strength but high status and burning ambition too scorching for his own good: someone born to be taken advantage of.

“I struggle to understand that ritual... A mere commoner selected as Paladin instead of someone with a more *suitable* name.”

“Yes, exactly... That commoner must have played some trick!”

“The Box should be returned to its rightful place. Its rightful owner. What an embarrassment to your country to have that filth calling himself the Paladin.”

The attendant gave him a warning look. “That’s enough, Mister Shrimp. We don’t need a foreigner criticizing a ritual in our—”

“No, he’s right. Keep your mouth shut.”

“Master Flay...!”

Flay jerked his chin. The attendant reluctantly stepped back.

“So? What do you want me to do?” Flay asked.

“Accomplish an irrefutable feat in battle and request the Holy Garb Box in return.”

“Not bad. Any particular feat in mind?”

“Become the star of the most important battle in this civil war: the fall of the Holy City.”

“The Holy City...?”

The idea sank in like a serpent’s whisper. Conquering a foreign capital would certainly be a worthwhile accomplishment, but the Pope had given him no order outside of eliminating the Satanists and those suspected of affiliation. Invading and seizing the Holy City was far outside his jurisdiction.

“What do you think?” asked Shrimp.

“If I do take the Holy City... His Holiness would surely recognize my talent...”

“Forgive me, but the Pope’s vision is clouded. He places more weight on an incomprehensible selection process over your right by blood. Here you, who should be the true Paladin, are wasted.”

Flay’s eyes widened.

“The Pope must open his eyes,” Shrimp continued. “You may have to risk your own safety. You may have to tell the Pope what he doesn’t wish to hear. That is a role only the true Paladin can play.”

“You’re absolutely right... I’ve been too obedient for too long...” Deflated, Flay walked out of the ballroom.

His attendant made to follow him, but seemed to recognize the futility in chasing him, and barked at Shrimp. “What is the meaning of this, to egg on Master Flay like that?!”

“Egg on? I merely shared my honest opinion.”

“What do you want?! Attacking the Holy City is not a part of our mission!”

“Actually, my uncle refused.” Shrimp began to chuckle, curling his back.

Shrimp had suggested conquering the Holy City and using the Holy Maidens and the city’s people as hostages, all so that the militaristic faction would surrender. Dona wanted to avoid attacking the Holy City where White resided, convincing himself that if he crossed this line White would hate him forever.

The attendant was outraged at the explanation. “You dare try to use us for something as frivolous as that?!”

“All for my uncle’s grand romance. We appreciate the Tzardom’s cooperation,” Shrimp cackled and left the attendant. Flay and Shrimp were kindred spirits in a way.

While the attendant chased after Flay with gritted teeth, he knew full well that any advice he could give would fall on deaf ears.

Meanwhile, far below the lavish ball, Azur was carrying a tray of food towards the cell that held the Numbered children.

The cell was filled with the stench of rust, whale oil, rotten meat, and feces. In contrast to the bustling ballroom, the cell was silent, as if time stood still. The place had once held a hundred boys and girls abducted for Dona’s entertainment. The Central nobles had gone through them one way or another until less than ten of them remained... And all of them were at death’s door.

None of them ate, for they all longed to die as soon as possible. Some of the children had committed suicide by bashing their heads against the stone wall, but chained collars prevented the remaining children from following suit.

“This fortress will soon become a battlefield.”

No one responded to Azur. They had no strength to do so, but some had ruptured eardrums from repeated beatings.

Azur’s voice was the only sound that could be heard. “I continued to look for a place to evacuate you, but I failed to do so.”

The eyes of the children turned to him. There was a child with one leg, a girl who had one of her eyes gouged out, a boy who had his genitals removed by a

noble with an abnormal fetish. The girl who had half her face ripped off and replaced with a pig's face did not move a muscle. Life itself ceased to exist in this cell.

“I may not look like it now, but I used to make a living by assassination. It was an everyday occurrence for me to take people's lives.” It was a monologue he didn't necessarily mean for anyone to hear. Maybe this was his last confession. “I must have been broken by the repetition. I could no longer feel. Life felt as insignificant as a leaf in the wind. In the end, color was drained from my world.” As fruitless as it was for Azur to say this now, he spoke from his heart. His past, present, and future all blurred gray. “Even though I have lost my heart...I feel a pain in my chest when I see you. I feel your life, your warmth...disappearing.”

Azur gripped his chest, feeling for his pulse. It was an emotionless heart on the brink of freezing, but he could still feel it beating.



“I pleaded for your release. I do not know if I will succeed, but it is worth risking my life for. Please, take care.”

The one-eyed girl shed a tear. Even now, there was someone who still cared about them.

Once Azur left, sobs could be heard in the cell. There was no telling how the children felt in that moment.

The next day, the Salamander Knights would attack, causing what would later be called the infamous Renegade Light incident.

At the same time, a girl who had history with this knight’s order was about to make a decision.

——Field Hospital, the village of Rabbi.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

Yu peered into the girl’s eyes for confirmation, and she gave a determined nod.

“I’ve never healed wings before...” said Yu.

“Thank you.”

Yu touched what was left of Eagle’s wings, imagining what they had once looked like. No matter how damaged they were, Yu could restore them without a problem; she had healed everything from lost limbs and ruptured organs to genetic conditions.

Akira Ono had given Yu the ability to heal any illness and injury, along with plenty of mad scientist traits that drove Yu to constantly *tinker* with the human body and mind using her Censorship skill.

Yu’s fingers morphed into a series of medical equipment. As quickly as they had touched Eagle’s wings, the procedure was over.

“Eagle wings... They’re beautiful.” Yu admired the silver feathers.

Eagle, on the other hand, showed no sign of excitement. “Thank you, Miss

Kirino.”

Something clicked within Yu. “You have a history with the Tzardom knights.”

“Yes...”

“Did you want your wings back to fight them? I wonder if the Secretary gave you permission to do so.”

“It’s a personal issue...” Eagle was ready to put an end to her past.

That was a source of concern for Yu: would Eagle inadvertently throw a wrench into the Secretary’s perfect plan? Of course, the Demon Lord’s “plan” was composed entirely of wrenches. It was miraculous how far he had come without a single thought-out strategy.

Tahara entered, having just finished his Communication with the Demon Lord.

“The fact that you came in now means we’re part of the flow chart, I suppose.”

“Don’t be so uptight about it, we always are.”

Eagle stood, somehow with a calm smile on her face that was only possible through unyielding resolve. Tahara and Yu silently agreed that they would have to physically tie Eagle down if they were to stop her from leaving.

Almost in sing-song, Eagle recited what the Demon Lord had once told her.

“He told me one time... No matter how tough things get in the middle, and no matter how many times I fail, I only need to win once in the end. As long as I’m determined, I’ll get plenty of opportunities to take on the challenge again.”

Yu and Tahara were sobered by this quote. Neither of them were invincible, and both had experienced defeat, even the fall of their empire.

With mixed emotions, Tahara said, “I got a great message for you from the Secretary. Go kick their asses. He’ll cover yours.”

“Thank you!”

Eagle left the Field Hospital to find Luna outside of the front entrance, ready to depart with her carriage.

“Luna... How did you...?”

“You don’t think I’d know what my servant was up to?! If you’re going to tussle with the Tzardom, I’m coming with you, so be careful!”

“It’s dangerous, Luna. We might die...”

“Unlike you, slowpoke, I’m a super strong and important Holy Maiden. Don’t worry about me.”

Eagle could only chuckle at Luna’s unchanging attitude. Considering the havoc the Tzardom knights were wreaking in Holylight, Luna would have gone to deal with them anyway. The Holy Maidens were meant to defend and guide the people; however, Holylight was a vast country, which would have made Luna’s plan more difficult to execute.

“Where are they anyway? Do you have any leads?” she asked.

“I know that order well. They’ll make their way to the Holy City.” Recalling the self-aggrandizing Flay, Eagle scowled. She wondered how many lives the renegade knights’ order and their *purification* had taken.

“I won’t let them attack the Holy City... Let’s go, Eagle!”

“Yeah!”

Their carriage started towards the Holy City, leaving a cloud of dust in its wake. War carried on, and so did the negative spiral. The web of hatred and violence that had become so complex and entangled all parties would only be cut when *he* entered the picture.

Resurrection Night

—The Madam's Territory, Southern Holylight.

Shortly before Eagle and Luna's departure, eastern and especially southern Holylight remained unaffected by the growing effects of war. The lush farmlands of the south were still idyllic, even.

"Let the game of tag resume," Tahara commanded the caravan of horse-drawn wagons in the Madam's stead. "If you see the enemy, you hightail out of there. They'll most likely attack here," Tahara pointed to a point on the map.

The coachmen and workers took heed, but looked at Tahara curiously. Why did he order them to run with no regard for the cargo?

Tahara had been sending supply troops on a route that would just barely touch the enemy's radar so they could be robbed on purpose. Coincidentally, he was employing a similar strategy to Harts's.

"M-My Lord... We can really run away? You wouldn't punish us later...?"

"Scream as loud as you can while you're at it. Rather than you, they'll go after loot they can brag about. That's how the nobles are in this country." Tahara's orders had been specific, right down to where exactly the enemy would attack. With that prior knowledge, it would not be difficult for the drivers of the caravan to escape the attack. "Your team will make it through the mountain this way..." Tahara continued giving these peculiar sets of instructions, all to orchestrate victories for the opponent that would stroke their egos.

Tahara did not concoct this operation out of jest, but for several tactical reasons. For one, the enemy would have become suspicious if the Madam, who now had an alliance with the militaristic faction, sat back and did nothing. So, Tahara had given orders as if he were a lady who knew nothing of warfare. True to his intentions, the Central nobles became carried away by their repeated victories: pillaging, arson, and massacre committed against the common people. The price of Water Spell Stones had been inflated to the moon. The

citizens of Holylight felt like their lives were being toyed with. As Tahara had calculated, the Central faction and foreign forces were garnering much hate from the population.

Tahara took a smoke break and leisurely gazed up at the sky. *Good thing they're predictable. Now the people completely side with us.* Naturally, the populace would want the victory of the Demon Lord's forces, knowing that if the Central faction won, this tragedy could be repeated. They would embrace any new power, regardless of what platform was brought to the table. This was exactly what Tahara wanted.

Exhaling smoke, Tahara reviewed the seeds the Demon Lord had planted for them to reach this point. *The bait of the music box, healing Sambo, securing the Butterfly sisters, joining hands with Harts... Taming the Holy Maidens Luna and White, spreading goodwill among merchants and workers through the redevelopment of the eastern region...* There were plenty more moves he had made, all perfectly calculated towards seizing power in Holylight. In addition, the Demon Lord had set up their opponent. He had repeatedly taunted and embarrassed Dona until the latter was driven to his call to arms almost out of desperation, which made Dona antagonize the people of Holylight and any opposing factions. Now Holylight was in chaos, the people robbed of their possessions, water, and homes.

I know what you planned for, Chief. The people want, more than anything... A hero.

Of course, the Demon Lord had no such thoughts, but Holylight was following a similar trajectory as Euritheis had. In the face of chaos, poverty, and the fall of society, a population usually longed for a convenient hero to save the day. Knowing that Euritheis would soon fall into a similar situation as Holylight, Tahara and Yu had encouraged this with a rumor spread through Propaganda: *The Fallen Angel will rise again, smiting those who oppress the people.*

Seeing that the Demon Lord was embarrassed by the rumor that he was the Fallen Angel, his two advisors had taken advantage of Holylight's faith in the Great Light and Angels, who seemed to have ignored their prayers as life worsened for the average citizen of Holylight and the class divide only grew.

Two thousand years had passed since the disappearance of the last Angel. Two thousand years. Countless prayers had been made to them during that time. Funny enough, people had begun feeling a sort of respect and adoration for the being that had fought against the Great Light, creating the illusion of such a being as the champion of the people, similar to how a vilified historical figure was reevaluated after some time.

All right, Central nobles. Keep farming all that hate. Snickering, Tahara fired off a Communication to the Demon Lord.

The man rumored to dole out divine smite had just awoken from a nap.

—An Inn in Euritheis.

The meeting was a success. The don was quite the respectable young man.

Ha ha ha! The fearsome don's nothing more than the good kid, eh, Chief? Tahara could see the Demon Lord outclassed the don in terms of villainy.

During this conversation, the Demon Lord made sure to plagiarize Gorgon's interpretation of his actions to justify himself, much like a con man weaves a tightrope of lies to walk across.

I hate to say it, but you put too many schemes into everything you do and say. Imagine being the one trying to figure out every detail you've accounted for a hundred moves ahead, Communicated Tahara.

I'm the one trying to figure it out! the Demon Lord thought silently, since he had already disguised Gorgon's wit as his own. He only Communicated with gravitas, *Your concern is under consideration.*

Dona boy hasn't changed, but we've got the Tzardom and Xenobia knocking on our door to play in our yard. All this pillaging and burning down settlements... They're a rowdy bunch.

With a heavy heart, the Demon Lord gazed up at the ceiling. War had begun for real. He had been told about the suspicious movements among the Central nobles (whoever they were), but it had never seemed like a real threat. The Demon Lord had never met Dona, after all, and had no knowledge of the Central faction.

And Luna's friend came to Yu to heal her wings.

Oh...?

Apparently she had much on her mind. My call is that she's going to war. She has beef with the knights' order the Tzardom sent in.

Tahara explained Eagle's past, and the Demon Lord contemplated. Even at their first meeting, she had been abused by a Tzardom troop. Her life had been a cycle of being hunted by the Salamander Knights, who robbed her of everything in the process.

Being hunted down for years to get beaten down and crucified in the end... I would have snapped, the Demon Lord thought. He would have returned their violence a hundred fold. He pitied Eagle, remembering her constantly downturned, woeful expression. *She must have pains no one else can understand... Who could tell her how to settle this with those knights?*

Even in the modern day, there were plenty of crimes that evaded justice, their victims left powerless. The Demon Lord would never deny a victim taking the matter of justice into their own hands.

The Tzardom wants another fight, huh? the Demon Lord realized, frustration boiling in his chest. He had just had a weird hunk of metal sicced on him the other day. *All right... If a fight is what they want, I'll give them exactly that!*

The Demon Lord's eyes lit up as he told Tahara, *Tell her not to hold back. Go kick their asses. I'll cover hers.*

Tahara whistled. *That's quite the reassurance! As for Luna...*

Knowing her, she'll go with her friend. Let her. The Demon Lord chuckled, recalling the last time. He knew that Luna wasn't the type to listen to words of restraint.

And Yu finished up a report for you. I looked into Dona's fortress. He's got about forty thousand.

Quite the party... I'll go through the report in the Hot Springs Resort.

Having finished his Communication, the Demon Lord turned to Mitsuhide, who was gleefully grilling more mochi. He intended to leave her here.

“Something came up,” he said. “Make yourself at home here.”

“How long will you be gone?”

“I don’t know yet... Let go of my coat!”

“I’m going to be so lonely on my own.” She thought the Demon Lord was the only other person she had met from Jipang in years.

The Demon Lord could understand that sentiment. “It’s a bit complicated. Once it’s all over, I’ll invite you into my village.”

Mitsuhide grunted reluctantly.

The Demon Lord hesitated to rope Mitsuhide into bloody combat after last time. His conflict with Dona had nothing to do with her.

“Please tell me what to call you before you go,” she said.

“What?”

After denouncing the name King, the Demon Lord was unsure of what to say. He didn’t want to use the title Demon Lord, and he feared that she would misunderstand Kunai to be its homonym in Japanese, which would insinuate a royal connection.

Mitsuhide casually said, “How about Shogun?”

“Do I look like one?!”

“So you do have ties to the shogun’s clan...”

“I don’t! Whatever, just call me King!” The Demon Lord fled by Quick Travel. This would result in further convincing Mitsuhide that he was of royal birth.

It’s been a while since I was last at the village...

In an instant, the Demon Lord was standing in the office of the Hot Springs Resort, where Tahara and Yu had prepared a spread of paperwork to await his arrival.

“Welcome back, Mister Secretary,” Yu said.

“Made off like bandits, didn’t we, Chief?”

A calm smile came over the Demon Lord as Yu gave him a bouquet of black

roses that glistened as if they were wet. Black roses had rather sinister implications in this case, like “you are forever mine,” “never-ending love,” *etc.* Not knowing any of them, the Demon Lord nonchalantly said, “It really feels like home when I get flowers from you.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“The purple ones were beautiful, but I like the black ones. I’m looking forward to the next batch, Yu.”

“Mister Secretary...!”

The Demon Lord seemed thoroughly relieved that Yu had continued her peaceful hobby of gardening.

Tahara, on the other hand, didn’t know what to say. The black roses were fertilized by the bishop’s rotting body. He tried not to think about it.

“I’ll take that report,” the Demon Lord said. He took it and flipped through its pages. Dona’s fortress was drawn up into detailed maps, accompanied by detailed descriptions of Dona’s army: their numbers and types of weapons, amount of food stocked in the fortress, and even notable works of art. The Demon Lord felt overwhelmed by the report that was as thick as a brick. He swiftly abandoned his attempt to understand the document.

“It’s an interesting report indeed...”

“Yes, sir. I interro— researched it thoroughly.”

The Demon Lord turned the pages solemnly, portraying a look of deep concentration. The information went in one eye and out the other, but he was looking for one particular detail: the number of Holy Coins Dona held and their location.

“What about Holy Coins, Yu?”

“I’m sorry, sir. There wasn’t enough...information.”

“I see...”

Yu had nearly slipped up, but the Demon Lord might not have batted an eye if he discovered the bishop’s fate. He had no sympathy for anyone who hurt women or children—a characteristic shown clearly in his *bosozoku* alter ego.

This... The Demon Lord stopped at a particular page that explained Dona's *selection* of ladies gathered from around the country. *Some king or emperor on Earth did something like this... What a douche.* There were indeed rulers in history who had similar habits. He only chuckled at this, but his expression sombered as he read the next paragraph. *The Numbered... What the hell...?!* There was an account of children being abducted, forced to satisfy the sadistic pleasure of the Central nobles.

The account was based on Milligan's detailed confession he had made to be released from unbearable pain. The details of the Numbered's lives and deaths would have made most sick, but Yu had described every detail matter-of-factly.

"Why..." The Demon Lord stopped himself from finishing the question: *Why didn't you tell me?* It wouldn't have been fair to blame Tahara and Yu for it. He had put his priority in looking for items that defended him from magic, and hadn't paid much mind to Dona.

Unaware of the Demon Lord's true feelings, Tahara scratched his head. "The Central nobles are soaking in all the hate from around the country, which is great news for us. If they keep going at it, we'll garner more and more support without lifting a finger."

Yu laughed, amused that the moths were being drawn to the flame. "Very useful in that regard, even if their brains are empty."

"You said it. Chief, let's keep them going for a while and wait for the perfect time to stroll in."

Tahara and Yu had planned to let Dona gather as much scorn as possible, only standing up just as the people of Holylight could not take it anymore. They did not doubt that the Demon Lord's vision was aligned with this plan.

"No, we'll leave now. Tahara. Prepare to travel to the Holy Castle. I will see White."

"Wha—?! Ch-Chief, if we take off this early, we'll miss out on—"

"Yu, make the same changes you made to me last time."

"B-But, Mister Secretary..."

“Did I stutter?” the Demon Lord spoke with audible frustration.

Those words seemed to strike Tahara and Yu like a bolt of lightning. They were quaking at the command of their creator. Before they could think, every cell in their bodies worked to please the Demon Lord. Once they left the room, the Fallen Angel Lucifer materialized in the office.

Looking into a mirror, the Demon Lord (now Fallen Angel) laughed. “Is it a ‘miracle’ to obliterate scum like him?”

Just as he said so, Tahara and Yu reentered, looking as sheepish as children who had just been scolded by their parent.

Timidly, Tahara offered his projection. “Chief... We’re going to put on a big show with White, aren’t we?”

“Indeed.”

This time, the Demon Lord’s intentions and Tahara’s interpretation were in sync. They thought that eliminating the enemies who had been terrorizing the country would produce the desired effect, especially in White’s presence while under the guise of the Fallen Angel.

Just in case, the Demon Lord sent a Communication to Kondo. *We’re going off west for a while. If anyone suspicious comes near the village, take care of them.*

Y-Yes, sir!

As Kondo stammered, the three held hands: the Fallen Angel Lucifer, the genius sniper, and the devil in a lab coat. The three of them showing up at the battlefield together would be nothing short of a nightmare for their enemy. No matter the war, they would be sure to end it.

“Let us go take the ugly pig to market...”

With that, the three vanished from the office.

The time of the clash that would decide Holylight’s (and the entire continent’s) fate fast approached.

——Holy Castle, Holylight.

The Holy Castle, the center of the nation, was in peril. Dona had finally bared his ambitions and called nearby nobles to action, gathering his army at a fortress in his territory on a scale large enough for anyone to see it as a rebellion. In addition to western nobles, many from the center and south of the nation joined Dona, as well as the leader of the Holy Knights' Order and three thousand of his men. As a result, the Holy Castle had fallen into unprecedented chaos.

"White, Harts has left his fortress with five thousand soldiers."

"Very good...!"

Deep within the Holy Castle, Gran and White awaited each piece of news with great anticipation. That being said, good news was few and far between. A good portion of the final defense that was the Holy Knights' Order had betrayed them. The remaining five thousand would have their hands full defending the Holy City. What was more, the working class had been dried out with the embargo on Water Spell Stones. The wealthy would have had some stockpile of them, but the poor had been seen ransacking the rich for their stock more and more often.

"That vile Dona... Only a devil would rob the people of water!" Gran stomped her feet, cane in the air, but their reality did not change.

They had set up water stations throughout the land that used the royal reserve of Spell Stones, but it was doing nothing to quell the hysterics sweeping the nation. With food being bought up from markets, chaos was reaching its peak.

"We need to hold off the Tzardom and Xenobia somehow..."

Of course, the foreign forces were just another kick in the gut as the Tzardom *cleansed* those they deemed heretics and Xenobia lowered themselves to banditry.

Queen entered the heavy silence of the room with her usual attitude. "Look at your sorry mugs... We need a drink."

"This isn't the time for your jokes, Queen! Not now!"

"That's the only thing we can do... At least for now..." Queen threw her feet

onto the round table as usual and leaned back in her chair. Her glare was sharp, showing that she wasn't joking.

White, who knew Queen better than anyone, reconsidered her interpretation. Even Gran, who usually preferred to interject, gave Queen a silent look.

"What are you thinking, Queen?" asked White.

"That look... You're waiting for something," Gran added.

"The enemy's fifty thousand strong. The war won't end until we slit Dona's throat."

Queen commanded 108 fearless knights. They may have won conflicts here and there doing as much as they could, but it wouldn't change the tide of war. Queen's gang would weaken with every fight, but the enemy could replenish their fighters indefinitely from a pool of fifty thousand. A crushing defeat was imminent. The only time Dona would leave the fortress would be to come to the Holy Castle when the war finally ended in victory for the Central faction.

"You mean to slay him when he comes to the castle after the war. That is too late," said Gran.

"I'll at least get to tear him limb from limb with my own hands..."

The room fell silent. Killing Dona after the war would not address the bigger picture. Shrimp would most likely inherit control and resume the new regime. In any variation, Holylight seemed checkmated.

Nonetheless, Gran decided to finally relay a particular piece of information to White. "Dona really has no shame... He requested you."

"Me?"

"He must intend to wed you to validate his rule."

"Is that so...?" White considered it. Dona's scheme could have worked. In exchange for ending the war, White might have sacrificed herself to save her people.

"Forget about it, Sis," Queen spat. "No good's going to come from you being a pig's slave."

Indeed, the pig will soon be gone...

Black feathers rained down on the silent room. The women looked up at the altar to find a man sitting there, one leg crossed over the other. White beamed at the sight of him, but Gran let out a short gasp and fell on her behind. Queen fell speechless and tumbled with her chair onto the floor. She stared at the black wings, mouth flapping soundlessly. She sensed a dark aura from them, more than any she'd felt ever before.

"I came to invite you to a ball, though it will be a bit busy..."

The absolute reassurance those words brought White... Hearing his voice was the only thing it took for her to see a ray of hope in a sea of despair.

"Lord Lucifer...!" White couldn't help but run over and embrace him.

Yu stared at her from beside the Fallen Angel, as Tahara whistled and averted his eyes to all corners of the room, avoiding involvement in the matter at all cost.

"Miss Holy Maiden...?" Yu said. "The Secretary is very busy. Get ready...now." Yu tore White from the Fallen Angel and gave her a death stare.

"Ah! Wh-Wh-Who are you?!" White didn't understand what she was to get ready for. At this point, she noticed the muscular man on the other side of Lucifer, and felt herself redden knowing that he had seen her embrace.

The Demon Lord ignored everything that transpired and gave swift directions. "Queen, was it...? Prepare for a fight at the Holy Castle until things settle in the west. White, come with me. I'm going to take out the trash."

"D-Do you mean Dona? He has amassed tens of thousands—"

"It is quality that matters, not quantity." The Demon Lord jerked his chin and his advisors held hands.

Eager to leave the room, Tahara pictured Dona's fortress and Quick Traveled.

The dazed Gran and thoughtful Queen were left in the room.

"Impossible... Such a dark aura...?"

The Demon Lord had equipped the Fallen Angel Wings item. Even Queen

couldn't make a joke about this.

Despite their departure, Gran was still shaking. "Fallen Angel...?! From the days of myth..."

"Calm down, Gran."

"Hush! How could I remain calm when—" Gran was struck with a coughing fit from being overexcited. She was still confused, but a few of her curiosities had been satisfied: who the Demon Lord really was, and who had given the Angel's Ring to White.

Queen's thoughts seemed to be in the same place. "I was wondering who managed to take that hardheaded sister of ours... But the Fallen Angel from the days of old? Now that's what I call a punchline!"

"What are you laughing about, Queen...? This is a grave threat to our nation."

"Our country's crumbling as we speak. I bet Luna's dumb ass is head over heels for him too."

"Silence! What Holy Maiden would fall in love with the embodiment of evil?!" Gran cried, having completely forgotten about Dona. The Three Angels that Holylight worshipped once served the Great Light and fought the devils; the Holy Maidens were their servants. It was hardly a joke that those Holy Maidens had fallen for the Fallen Angel, said to have rebelled against the Great Light and ruled the night.

"That's Lucifer, huh...? What a show-off. Nothing like Sir Zero."

"This isn't the time! The Fallen Angel has infiltrated the Holy Castle!" Gran felt a cold trickle down her back.

Queen shared the realization. "Gran... A Hellion can't make it into the Holy Castle. Isn't that right?"

In reality, just *approaching* the Holy Castle would have weakened any Hellion or monster, and touching its grounds would have burned them to a crisp from its Holy and Light pulse. Infiltrating the altar room in the deepest reaches of the Holy Castle was beyond impossible.

"Th-This isn't right... The Fallen Angel in the Holy Castle..." Gran muttered, on

the verge of insanity.

Queen, on the other hand, was surprisingly calm. She knew that no ordinary man could have taken the devoted White and selfish Luna at the same time. “I see. The Demon Lord that Luna’s dumb ass was talking about. He’s Lucifer.”

One of Lucifer’s many pseudonyms was, indeed, “Demon Lord.”

Queen pondered the matter. “There was that rumor that the Demon Lord blew up the resurrected King of Devils... I can see that thing beating up a god.”

Queen had sensed the immeasurable depths of the Fallen Angel’s strength; it far surpassed the power of the high-rank devil she had once faced before the Holy Castle.

Queen left the room and called Fuji over to her.

“Is something wrong, My Queen?”

“Get ready for a brawl. I can smell it in the air.”

Fuji flew to relay the message to his men. Queen’s instinct had never betrayed her when it came to sensing a fight.

Queen’s men and the remaining members of the Holy Knights’ Order hurried to secure the defenses of the capital.

Meanwhile, a group of four appeared out of thin air before the front gate of Dona’s grand fortress: the Demon Lord dressed as the Fallen Angel, his two advisors, and White. Attempting to attack such a fortress with an army of four would have been farcical...if the team was not already assured of victory.

Standing before the enormous gate and walls, the Demon Lord burst into laughter. “Aha ha ha ha! *This* is the fortress of the most powerful man in Holylight? It might as well be a sand castle.” He hadn’t spoken out of bravado or provocation; he couldn’t help but laugh at the measly fortress, comparing it to the Sleepless Castle he had created.

Having assessed their surroundings, Tahara leisurely lit a cigarette. “No traps or anything, Chief. I don’t think they got the memo.”

“Hm. No traps, machine guns, Fire Wire, land mines, or force fields. I expected a battleship on the water, at least.”

Tahara guffawed. “Battleship! You’ve got some high expectations, Chief!”

The Demon Lord simply walked up to the gate, and the guards blinked at the man with wings, confused.

“Hey, what is that...? Is there a masquerade going on today?”

“Maybe one of the lords is arriving late.”

“But the woman behind him... Doesn’t she look like Lady White?”

“Oh, yes. She came to surrender...well, marry Lord Dona.”

The soldiers chatted in the darkness atop the walls. There had already been an announcement that Dona, the leader of the Central nobles and the next king of Holylight, would wed White. The soldiers could not have been blamed for believing this; no one in this area was a civilian, and all personnel were classified, down to each and every guard. Arrogance trickled down, as it always did. Therefore, they never doubted their victory. They had gotten by with the outlook that everyone but nobles were mere weeds to be trodden upon.

“Look! Lady White has come to surrender!”

“Victory is ours!”

“Tell Lord Dona immediately. Tonight, he shall consummate their union.”

“For three days straight, more like. A Holy Maiden without clothes is just a woman.”

Laughter echoed through the castle walls. The Demon Lord stood before the gate and gave it a kick. The gate, which had been forged of the best steel and fortified with numerous spells, crumbled like a sheet of tofu and thundered to the ground.

“Whaaaat?!”

“Wh-What happened?!”

Pandemonium ensued among the soldiers stationed around the gate; they didn’t understand what had happened, but their steadfast barrier was blown to bits.

The gatebreaker strode into the grounds and theatrically announced with his

arms open wide, “A pigpen fit for you scum. Allow me to bid you hello...and goodbye.”

Tahara began slapping his knees in laughter, and even Yu couldn't contain a chuckle. They, too, saw the fortress as a hut at best.

The guards blew their horns and summoned battalions, but the Demon Lord and his advisors seemed unfazed. Tahara silently stood to the left of the Demon Lord, a step in front of him, and glared at the horde with his deep, blue eyes. Yu stood opposite and eyed her prey.

“Lord Lucifer...” White wrapped herself around the Demon Lord's left arm and looked up at him, somewhat unnerved.

The Demon Lord replied by swinging his right hand into the air and activating a dreadful skill: the same one he had activated whenever the Sleepless Castle was attacked during a Game. At times, the skill had been activated by a player who chose to serve the empire.

The Demon Lord was struck with memories of the apocalyptic power, the surging darkness, the ecstasy... The countless battles over the Sleepless Castle. An evil smile grew on his face. “We are the fallen star, the victors at dawn...!”

Duel Skill: The Sword to End Wars!

As the Demon Lord swung his hand down, an explosive, dark pulse burst out, causing a violent gust of wind. The skill strengthened the user and their allies within view to their maximum potential; a true duel skill that bolstered each affected person's Attack, Defense, and Dexterity by 22 points each.

As feathers blacker than pitch sank through the air, Tahara and Yu flew.

The mad ball, later known as the Night of Resurrection, had begun.



Postscript

Thank you so much for picking up Volume 8! The author, Kurone Kanzaki, here. I'm sorry for the delay in getting this book out. My personal life, as well as corona, made things a bit hectic. I hoped to release the volume sooner, but my mind is completely wiped right now.

I'll have to spend like a year drinking and working on my health, or something, dammit... Damn corona. *chugs beer*

In any case, this was the volume in which the Demon Lord's cunning strategy came into full effect. Personally, I was moved by how he could make complete buffoons out of all the powerful characters he faced. Who else could have reached such ridiculous heights out of just misunderstandings? I couldn't stop laughing as I wrote this one. He has a true talent...for comedy.

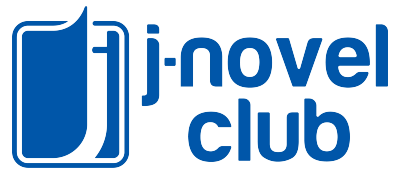
Gorgon, who you could call the boss of this volume, actually made his first appearance in Volume 2. Ajax Kong had a subtle appearance too. You might see other characters make a surprising reappearance in the future...

I guess the heroine for this volume is our dear Mitsuhide... Poor Demon Lord. Ren may also have her hands full with her.

In the next volume, we'll finally see him take on the Central nobles. It's taken a long time to get here, and I think you'll see the stories of many characters conclude. Most of the volume should be new material, so please look forward to that.

You can expect new volumes in the manga series as well. Follow me on Twitter! See you in Volume 9!





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Demon Lord, Retry! Volume 8

by Kurone Kanzaki

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